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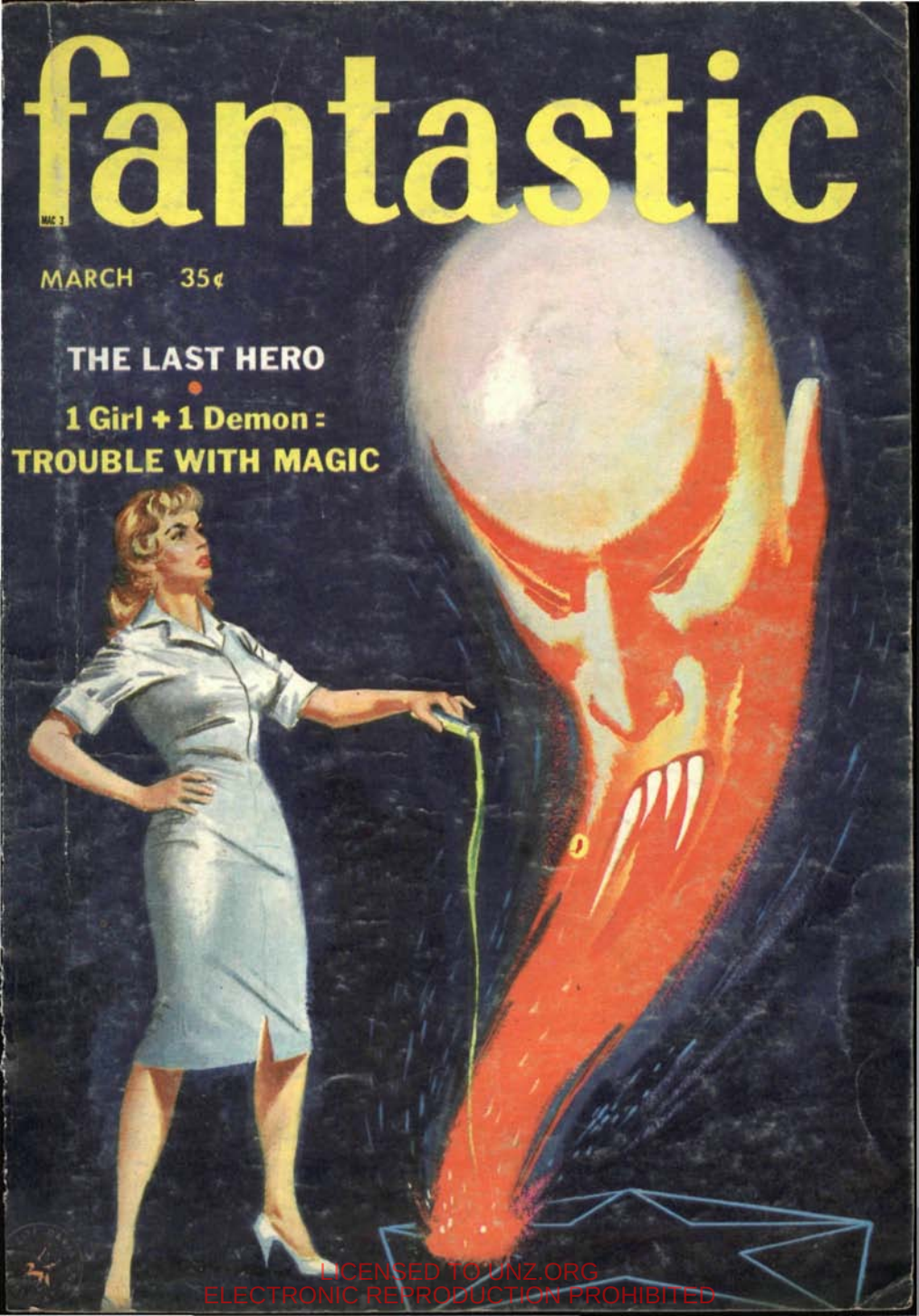
THE LAST HERO

1 Girl + 1 Demon :
TROUBLE WITH MAGIC



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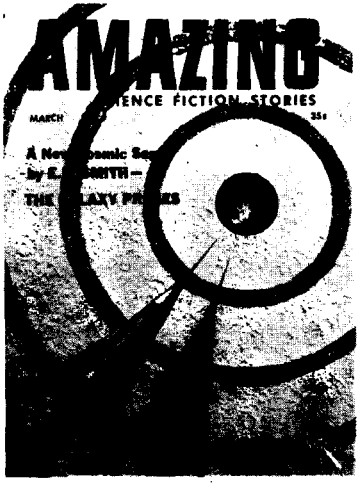

2. ISAAC ASIMOV has written a story especially for this issue to celebrate the anniversary of his first published work – in AMAZING twenty years ago. Aptly enough, the story is called *Anniversary*.

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MARCH 1959

Volume 8 Number 3

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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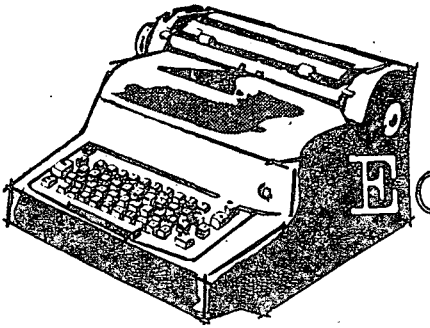

Editorial

THE world of fantasy shrinks more and more every day.

Used to be that any hard-pressed writer of science-fiction or fantasy could always find a way out for his hero or heroine by equipping him/her with a force field.

But the handwriting is on the wall for writers who use their force fields loosely. For, lo and behold, the force field is now a fact. Or an almost-fact.

Let me quote from a recent news story in the N. Y. *Times*, no publisher of fantasy:

"The creation of an invisible force field to ward off incoming missiles or other concrete objects is no longer in the realm of fantasy, it was reported here yesterday to the American Rocket Society.

"A Princeton University Physicist, working on the high-temperature-plasma-physics study called Project Matterhorn at Princeton, N. J., reported that the creation of fields of invisible magnetic forces to deflect missiles 'is gradually coming to realization in the new field of hydromagnetics.'

"Hydromagnetics concerns the action of a fluid or gas subject to a large magnetic field and a smaller electric field.

"Dr. Russell M. Kulsrud, the Princeton physicist, suggested that invisible magnetic shields against enemy missiles might be put up. If an incoming object is electrically responsive, he said, it is possible to handle it very effectively with a magnetic field.

"Hydromagnetics has been most commonly used in studying the possibilities of nuclear fusion. In fusion devices, magnetic fields keep a hot dense fluid (an electrified gas called a plasma) away from walls of a containing chamber long enough for nuclear reactions to take place and power to be removed."

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THE TROUBLE WITH MAGIC

By RANDALL GARRETT

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

There was this girl, and there was this demon, and then there was a witch, and a ferryboat in the backyard—and, oh, it was a real mess!

The thymus calm, revolver's head,
Toothpickaninny sings;
Oft sips and chews Aunt's Healing Wax,
Of cabby Jason King's;
A wider Z his boy Ling got,
Ann wed her pig's off wings.
—Ancient Druid Chant

BARTON MACNEIL looked at the quotation and scowled. "Hell," he said, "this doesn't make sense."

"Of course it doesn't," said Dr. Perrivale. "Magical chants aren't supposed to make sense. At least, not in ordinary language. It's the precise syllabification and the timing of the variable dissonance, combined with the fricatives, dentals, and labials of pronunciation that produce the effect. The meaning of the words has nothing to do with it."

Barton MacNeil looked at the diminutive little man who had handed him the paper. Dr. Perrivale wasn't actually as small as he looked. He was maybe five-eight or nine, but he gave such an impression of smallness that it required two adjectives to get the effect. Perrivale was small only in that he seemed to be forever shrinking from the world.

His age was indeterminate —no less than fifty-five, certainly, and possibly as much as eighty. There was no way of knowing. His eyes were bright and clear, and as blue as the Bay of Naples on a summer day, but his skin was a grayish-brown, leathery integument that was as full of

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wrinkles as a contour map of the Dakota Badlands.

His hair was pure silver, what there was of it. It ran in a fringe around the back of his head and over his ears, leaving the rest of his head as naked as the star of the *Folies-Bergère* at the end of her act, though not nearly so pretty.

"But it says 'Ancient Druid Chant'," Barton pointed out. "How could an ancient Druid chant have words like 'revolver' and 'cabby' in it? The Druids have been extinct for hundreds of years."

"Over a thousand," corrected Dr. Perrivale pedantically. "But that has nothing to do with it. It's a matter of the essentials."

Barton MacNeil shrugged his broad shoulders and sat down in the thickly-upholstered easy chair in Dr. Perrivale's study. Bart MacNeil was thirty-five, a muscular, heavy-set man who had put on weight since he had been his *alma mater*'s top fullback sixteen years before, but who hadn't actually let himself get out of shape. His hair was still the same dark brown with a crisp curl, but there were swatches of gray at his temples.

"Look," he said quietly, "I'm supposed to be a lawyer. I'm supposed to take care of your estate, not your research. You asked me up here to explain something, but I—"

He stopped. Perrivale was holding up his hand. Inwardly, Bart sighed. The old man had money, and—up to a certain point—he was allowed to exercise his prerogative.

"Please, Mr. MacNeil," he said in his dry-as-alum voice, "I engaged you as my attorney because of your reputation; please don't spoil it now."

MacNeil raised a black eyebrow. "Dr. Perrivale, if I can say something in half a minute that will spoil a reputation that's taken years to build up, then the reputation isn't worth a damn." He paused. "Either I'm your attorney, or I'm not. If I am, then you have to trust me; if I'm not, then fire me and be done with it."

Perrivale finished polishing his *pince-nez*, adjusted them to his nose, and nodded. "Very good. I'll explain. You'll probably think me eccentric, but—"

"Dr. Perrivale," MacNeil interrupted, "it isn't my business to judge whether you're eccentric or not. If you want to leave all your money to a

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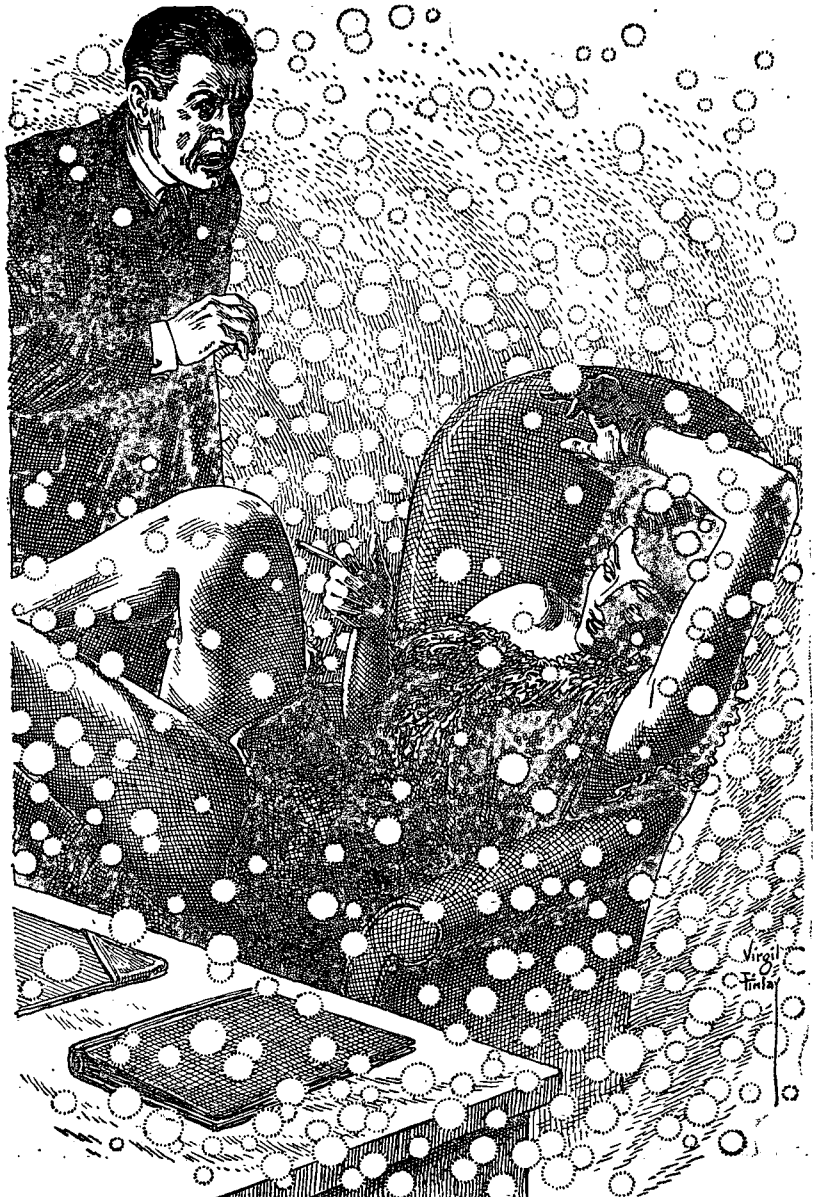

"MacNeil did a double-take when he saw the girl sitting at his desk."

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maternity home for pregnant werewolves, that's your business. My business is to see that the will is probated and that the money goes where you want it to go. That's all."

"But suppose I am really insane," asked Perrivale.

"That's not my business," said Barton MacNeil flatly. "If some twitch doctor proves that to the court, all right. But my job is to do what you want done. Period. Paragraph. I am your representative in court. I'll represent you—sane or not—to the best of my ability. Understand?"

"Do you think I'm insane?"

"Not so far," said MacNeil, "but that's not a legal opinion. Still, as long as you convince me that you're sane, I'll stick by you. I'll stick by you, in fact, until the Court rules you insane, no matter what I, myself, may think."

The old man nodded. "Fair enough. Now will you listen to what I have to say?"

Bart MacNeil nodded. "Sure I'll listen. That's what you retained me for."

Dr. Perrivale sat down in a leather-covered Morris chair, facing the lawyer. "I called you because, as I said, I am engaged in some rather dangerous research. I don't actually think that my life is in any real danger, but neither do I believe in leaving undone things which should be done."

MacNeil nodded noncommitally.

"As I said," the old man went on, "my work is concerned with magic—real, genuine magic, not prestidigitation. I have attacked the problem scientifically, and I've come up with some astounding results."

MacNeil waved a hand at the piece of paper with the queer verse on it. "That's one of the results?"

"You sound skeptical, Mr. MacNeil." Perrivale smiled a little. "I can't say that I blame you. But I'd like to point out that what was considered magic yesterday is commonplace today."

The lawyer nodded again, wondering when the old man would get around to the point.

"What I have done," said Dr. Perrivale, "is trim away the non-essentials of ancient and medieval magic, leaving only the essence, so to speak. Did you ever hear of foxglove?"

"That's what they make digitalis from, isn't it?"

"Precisely. It was known for centuries that the foxglove plant was a specific for cer-

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tain types of heart disease. But science discovered that it was not the whole plant that was doing the work, only one essential chemical—digitalis.

"In the same way, the first tranquilizers were discovered in a plant found in India."

Dr. Perrivale got up from the Morris chair and went over to his desk. He pulled open the top drawer and took out a small vial, stoppered up and sealed with a gob of red sealing wax. He handed the vial to Barton MacNeil.

The lawyer looked at it. It was about half full of a white, crystalline powder that could have been salt for all he knew. "What's this?" he asked.

Dr. Perrivale managed to look smug. "That," he said, "is the active principle of wolfbane. There's enough there, if properly used, to get rid of every werewolf in New York State."

"You remind me of the guy with the lion powder," said MacNeil, handing the bottle back.

"How's that?" Dr. Perrivale looked puzzled.

"Old joke," MacNeil explained. "Seems that a guy from New York City was visiting a farmer in Vermont. Every morning, the old farmer gets up and scatters several handfuls of powder all around the house. City boy finally asks him why.

" 'Lion powder,' says the old farmer. 'This stuff keeps the lions away.'

" 'But there's no lions within six thousand miles of here,' says the city guy.

" 'It's a dern good thing, too,' says the farmer, 'because this lion powder ain't worth a damn.' "

Dr. Perrivale smiled dryly. "Very good. You don't believe this would work, then?"

MacNeil shrugged. "It's just that I don't believe in the existence of werewolves, vampires, unicorns, virgins, and other such legendary fantasies."

"I see." Dr. Perrivale put the bottle back in his desk. "Well, it doesn't matter whether you believe in it or not; I wanted to tell you what I was doing, so that—"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Uncle George?" said a feminine voice.

"Come in, my dear," said Dr. Perrivale.

The study door opened, and Barton MacNeil sat up in his chair. The girl had no right to be in an ordinary house, wearing a white lab coat. With her golden hair, blue eyes, and perfect face, she

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should have been cavorting across Hollywood's silver screen. Even under the lab coat, he could see the outlines of a lushly rounded set of curves that could have competed successfully with Gina Lollobrigida or Jayne Mansfield.

Dr. Perrivale started to make introductions, but the girl interrupted him before he could say the first word. "I finally got Aunt Susan to sleep, Uncle George. I gave her two of those pills the doctor left. But I'm worried. Her health is none too good, and she shouldn't be using the stairs at all."

Dr. Perrivale looked worried. "I know. Poor Susan." He looked at MacNeil. "Susan is my older sister," he explained. "She is not in the best of shape, either physically or mentally." He paused, then said: "Mr. MacNeil, this is my niece, Janice. Janice, Mr. MacNeil is a lawyer."

She turned her big blue eyes on MacNeil and said: "I'm pleased to meet you." The way she said it made MacNeil feel that she really was pleased to meet him.

Then she looked back at her uncle. "I do wish you wouldn't worry so much, though, Uncle George." And then, before he could answer, she went on. "Aunt Susan will be all right now. I'll get on back to the lab. The extract of mandrake should be through the fractionator by now."

And she threw MacNeil another smile and left.

"Now, about the will, Mr. MacNeil," said Dr. Perrivale. "The bulk of the estate will go to Janice, of course. But there will have to be provisions for looking after my sister."

Barton MacNeil nodded and got out his notebook.

Six months later, Barton MacNeil had pushed the eccentric Dr. Perrivale and his *ménage* into the back of his mind. The will had been duly executed and filed, and the little alchemist-cum-magician had found no further uses for a lawyer. So when he stepped into his office one bright morning at nine, MacNeil was a little puzzled when his secretary said:

"A Miss Perrivale has been calling ever since eight-thirty. She's calling from the police station at Centre Street."

MacNeil frowned. "Perrivale? Oh, yeah. Janice Perrivale?"

"That's right, she—"

The phone rang, cutting off her words. The secretary picked up the phone. "Barton

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MacNeil, Attorney - at - Law. Good morning." She paused, while words hissed in her ear. She glanced at MacNeil and lifted her eyebrows in interrogation.

"Miss Perrivale?" he whispered.

His secretary nodded.

"I'll take it," MacNeil told her. He took the phone from her hand and said: "This is Mr. MacNeil. What seems to be the trouble, Miss Perrivale?"

"Can you come down to Centre Street right away? Something terrible has happened. Uncle George is in a coma, and Aunt Susan has disappeared, and the police want to hold me on a grand larceny charge."

"Grand larceny?" MacNeil asked. "What do they claim you stole."

There were tears of anger in her voice. "The damned fools think I stole the Staten Island Ferry!"

"Oh," said MacNeil. "How could they— Never mind. I'll be right down." He cradled the phone. "Take over," he told the secretary. "Emergency."

He grabbed a taxi and headed for the station as soon as he left his office building. Ten minutes later, he was getting out of the vehicle near City Hall. He paid the cabby, tipped him properly, and started towards his destination. Then he heard the newsboy shouting.

"Paper! Paper! Stolen ferryboats found in backyard of wealthy recluse! Big mystery! Getcha paper!"

MacNeil nabbed a paper and ran his eyes over the story as he walked.

The girl hadn't been kidding. Somehow, someone had managed to transport two ferryboats from the Hudson River to the back yard of Dr. Perrivale's mansion. Perrivale himself had been found unconscious in the laboratory of his home, and had been taken to St. Luke's. There was nothing in the paper about Janice's being arrested, but that simply meant that they hadn't had time to get that bit into print yet. Her photo was prominently displayed, along with the pictures of the two ferryboats in the backyard.

There was also an interview with two of the city engineers who had tried to explain how the boats could have been taken from the harbor to Perrivale's house in a few hours without anyone noticing it. Neither explanation was worth a damn.

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MacNeil pushed his way through the door of the police station and made his way to Captain Gillin's office. Since the paper had mentioned that Gillin was taking a personal interest in the case, MacNeil quite rightly suspected that his client would be there.

She was sitting in a fairly comfortable chair with her arms folded defiantly across her chest. Captain Gillin and another cop were trying to look tough, but when a woman has both beauty and money, there isn't much incentive to really be tough. Gillin looked up as MacNeil came in. He scowled.

"What the hell took you so long?" he tried to growl it, but his high Irish tenor voice wouldn't let him. "Miss Perrivale has clammed up on us. Says she won't talk until she sees her lawyer."

"She can see me now," said MacNeil. "What the hell's going on? What's the charges?"

"This galoot says I stole two ferryboats!" the girl snapped. "I'm accused of boat-lifting or ferrynapping or shipsnatching—whatever it's called."

"No, now that's not so," said Gillin. "We just want to know how they got in your backyard. And the ferry boys want to know how to get 'em back."

"Just a minute," said MacNeil, "do I understand you all right, Gillin?"

"Huh?" The detective captain looked blank. "Didn't I come through clear enough for you?"

MacNeil shook his head. "If the best engineers on the city payroll can't tell you how it was done, how do you expect a mere girl to tell you?"

"They were in her back yard," said Gillin.

"Sure," said MacNeil. "And empty billfolds are found in mailboxes, too, but you don't accuse the U. S. Postmaster of being a pickpocket, do you?"

"You think they were just dumped there?"

"Obviously. If you were going to steal a ferryboat, you'd put it someplace where it wasn't so conspicuous, wouldn't you?"

"Sure, but—"

"And, really, Gillin, do you think a girl—a frail little creature like this — could carry a ferry?"

"Well—"

"Of course not." MacNeil looked at the girl. "Did you take those ferries? Or do you know who did?"

She shook her head, and MacNeil swung back to the

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captain. "This girl's uncle is in the hospital—unconscious from the shock of such a frightening experience. Her beloved aunt has disappeared. And are you trying to help her in her grief? No, you're hounding her about something you aren't any too sure about yourself."

Gillin waved a hand in surrender. "Awright, awright, Counsellor. I'm no jury, so don't give me a speil. You don't need a writ of *habeus corpus,* either. You can go, Miss Perrivale, but if there is anything you might happen to think of, we'll be grateful if you'd tell us."

She stood up. "I will," she said with saccharine sweetness. "And as soon as you find out how those ships were moved to my uncle's house, would you be sure and tell me?"

Captain Gillin was still nodding as MacNeil and the girl left the room.

MacNeil bundled the girl into a taxi, gave the cabby her home address, and whispered: "Now, what the hell happened. Except for the fact that it happened, I'd say it was impossible."

"I'm hoping most people will think that," she said. She shook her head as though to clear it. "Who could have done it?"

MacNeil looked surprised. "Why, I thought it was Dr. Perrivale. Wasn't it?"

"No!" she said emphatically. "He'd never have pulled anything as stupid as that. Uncle George didn't do it."

The cabby half turned in his seat without actually taking his eyes off the traffic. "You talking about this guy that swiped the ferries? Ain't that something?"

"It's something, all right," said Janice morosely.

"What'd'ya suppose he wanted with 'em? You know what I think?"

"No," said Janice. "Do you?"

"I think he wanted to make yachts out of 'em. All these rich guys have yachts."

"Maybe he was building his own private navy," said MacNeil.

The cabby laughed. "Aw, that's silly. What would a guy want with a private navy?"

The cab shot up the ramp to the Hudson Drive and barrelled northwards. The cabby gave a lecture on the possibilities of converting ferryboats into private yachts, while his passengers subsided into silence.

The cab pulled up in front

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of the Perrivale residence, and the cabby's eyes bugged as he realized that he'd been sent to the Perrivale's—he could plainly see the funnels and upper decks of the *Elmira* and the *Ossining* looming high above the stone walls that surrounded the house itself.

All around were mobs of policemen, newspaper reporters, Transit Authority representatives, and curiosity seekers.

"You'll never get in there," said the cabby positively.

MacNeil paid him, added the usual tip. Janice handed him a dime. "Here. Go buy yourself a ferry."

They managed to get into the house without much trouble. A police sergeant who recognized Janice Perrivale bawled his way through the crowd and escorted MacNeil and the girl to the front door, pushing the crowd aside.

She let herself in with her key, and was immediately confronted by a six-foot-four colossus weighing a sixth of a ton.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Janice," he said in cultured British accents. MacNeil recognized him as the butler who had let him into the house six months before.

"Yes, Bevin, it's me. Who were you expecting? Sarah Churchill?"

"After everything that's happened, miss, I shouldn't be in the least surprised if it had been Madame Pompadour," said Bevin solemnly.

"How's everything going?" Janice asked as she removed her gloves and hat.

"I have endeavored to keep it from going, Miss Janice," he said. "The place has been full of newsmen and police, and they all seemed to want souvenirs and mementoes of their visit. I endeavored to keep them from going."

"Is there anyone left?"

"Only the servants are in the house at present—aside from yourself and Mr. MacNeil, of course. However, we were practically forced to turn over the garage to the police. They needed telephonic communications with various offices in the city."

Janice grabbed MacNeil's arm. "Come on Barton, let's get this over with before they tear down the walls."

MacNeil was so surprised by her use of his first name that he permitted himself to be propelled along without protest.

They ended up in the cellar, in a huge room that looked for all the world like a chem-

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istry lab, with a possible biological sideline.

"Help me," said Janice. She began handing him bottles, some containing oily liquids, others with various colored powders. "Carry these," she said. She took several other objects from a wall cupboard, said: "Come on!" in a peremptory tone, and headed for a door in the rear of the lab. The lawyer followed dutifully.

The second room was completely bare, except for a small table. Janice pointed at the table. "Put the stuff there, then go over in the corner and be quiet. No matter what happens, keep your mouth shut. Understand?"

MacNeil did as he was told.

Janice Perrivale arranged the bottles on the table, then she took a piece of chalk and began drawing designs on the floor. They looked like illustrations from a topology textbook.

Without turning around, she said: "There's a switch on the wall beside you. Shut out the lights. And remember, don't say anything or you might get us both killed."

Again MacNeil followed instructions.

In the darkness, the chalked outline glowed a luminous violet. It was actually bright enough so that the girl could see what she was doing. All MacNeil could see was a dark shadow moving in the eerie glow.

He heard glass stoppers clink in the bottlenecks, and faint gurglings and whisperings. A queer, burning, musk odor filled the air.

Then the girl began chanting in a low contralto voice.

"Shanim arula, menschig adula—
Bea, Betty, Bob, Hetty, blue—
Putnam tea gather, an witty argot—
Bea, Betty, Bob, Hetty, blue—"

MacNeil didn't get it all, but the chant sounded strangely familiar, as though he might have recognized it in a different setting.

Suddenly an orange glow manifested itself in the center of the glowing purple design on the floor. The orange reddened and grew to basketball size. Suddenly it shot upwards like a fountain of fire and metamorphosed into a tall pillar of glowing crimson. At first it remained formless, then, quite suddenly, it was no longer just a pillar of ruddy fire, but a caricature of a human being. The head was

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long and bald; the face, with its two pairs of eyes, one above the other, looked as though it were perpetually astonished. It reminded MacNeil of those "Had One Too Many?" pictures in bars. The mouth was wide and filled with snaggly yellow fangs; the tongue with which it licked its thin lips was definitely serpentine.

"What in Hell do you want?" it asked in a hoarse voice.

"Nothing in Hell, Minazel," Janice said calmly. "I just want a few things right here on Earth."

The demon shrugged beneath its long cloak. "Always something. Except for Alistaire Cooke and a few others, we've been doing pretty well ever since the seventeenth century until you came along. Nobody bothered us."

"Which gave you plenty of free time to bother us," Janice snapped. "Now quit whining. Was it you that brought those ferryboats up here from the bay?"

"Me? No." The demon shook his head vehemently.

"Can you tell me who did?"

The demon shrugged again. "Even if I did, I couldn't tell you. You know the rules. I can't divulge the name of a fellow demon."

Janice sniffed. "I've got a couple of spells that would make you tell me the True Name of Sathanas himself. But it would take too much time. Besides, you probably really don't know, and all that incantation would end up as a waste of time."

The demon turned pale, dropping in hue from crimson to orange. "Don't use *that* spell, Miss Janice—*please!* I'm not lying to you. Honest I'm not."

"Honest you certainly are not," said Janice, "nor truthful either, but I'll let it ride this time. Somebody got one of your brother demons to pull this stunt, and I'm going to find out who. Meanwhile, I have a job for you."

The demon Minazel regained some of his color. "Sure. Anything you say, Miss Janice."

"Take those boats back where they belong, and mind you don't hurt anyone in the process. If you do—"

"Don't worry," protested Minazel, "I'll do it right."

"All right. And keep an ear out for my voice from now on. If I call, you come running. I don't want to go through this conjuration every time I need you."

"Only for three days," said

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the demon obstinately. "I only have to stay on call for three days. That's the rules."

"Don't tell *me* the rules," Janice said sharply. "I know them. Now, get those boats back where they belong. *Move!*"

Without another sound, the demon vanished.

"Lights," said Janice. MacNeil flipped the switch.

Suddenly, there was a roar from outside the house. It sounded like several thousand people gasping at once. Which is exactly what it was.

"We've got to move fast now," Janice said. "Come on up to the roof." She grabbed one of the bottles from the table and ran out, with MacNeil on her heels.

There was a small elevator concealed in one wall. Janice opened what looked like a closet door, and there it was. "It leads to the observatory," she said. "Uncle George likes to do a little stargazing, too. He's trying to work out the laws of astrology."

There had been a time when Barton MacNeil would have smiled and looked tolerant if someone had said that, but he was no longer in an unbelieving mood.

The elevator reached the top of its shaft, and Janice went out into the observatory. She ignored the neatly-mounted eighteen-inch reflector telescope and went over to one of the windows.

The crowd was still milling around, but there was no trace of either of the huge ferries that had been there only moments before. None of them looked up at the third floor of the house.

Janice opened the window quietly. Then she took a pinch of powder from the bottle and began sprinkling it on the heads of the crowd below. The light breeze caught it and wafted it around. She was mumbling something under her breath.

After three pinches, she moved over to the other side of the room and did the same thing.

Then she carefully corked the bottle again. "Lethe powder," she said. "It causes selective amnesia."

Barton MacNeil and Janice Perrivale were cruising up Amsterdam Avenue towards 113th Street. The girl was behind the wheel of a Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce that had undoubtedly taken a large hunk out of twenty thousand dollars. She drove with her skirts hoisted well above her knees for freedom of leg motion, and Barton MacNeil

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found it difficult to keep his mind on what she was saying.

"—you'll see what will happen. By the time the afternoon papers come out, the whole thing will be dismissed as a mass hallucination. Some of those people won't remember anything about it, and will call the others liars. There'll be enough confusion to make everybody doubt everything."

From the back seat, Bevin said: "Don't you think it would have been better for me to have stayed behind, Miss Janice? Someone should be looking after the house."

"Nope," she said, "I don't think you should have stayed there. That Lethe powder is still floating around, and I'd just as soon you didn't get a whiff of it. If the other servants forget about the ferry affair, well and good, but I don't want my favorite butler with a hole in his memory."

"There are moments, Miss," he said moodily, "when I'd just as soon forget it."

The Rolls-Royce pulled up in front of St. Luke's Hospital, and the three of them piled out. Bevin got into the front seat and drove it on up the block to park while MacNeil and Janice went to the front door of the hospital.

MacNeil held the door open, and Janice started to go on inside. But just as she reached the open door, she bounced back. It was as though she had run into a rubber wall.

With a queer expression on her face, she reached out and prodded the doorway with her finger. Then she patted the air with the palm of her hand. "Damn," she said softly. "Can you feel that?"

Barton put out his hand. There was nothing there but air.

"Pardon me, please," said a voice behind them. It was a middle-aged lady who wanted nothing more than to go through the doorway that MacNeil and Janice were blocking. Janice stood aside, and the middle-aged lady went through the door without a bit of trouble.

"What is it?" asked MacNeil.

The girl was looking furious. "It's a personal barrier against me. Someone doesn't want me to get into the hospital to see Uncle George."

"Maybe I could push you through," said MacNeil. He got behind her and suited the action to the words. It was as though he were trying to push her through a brick building.

"Hey!" she yelped, "you're squashing me!"

"A pleasure," muttered

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MacNeil softly. But he stepped back, releasing the pressure.

There was a wall there, all right. A wall that did not exist for anyone but Janice Perrivale. To her, it was as real as concrete.

"Let's try the other doors," MacNeil suggested.

It was the same story. Every entrance into St. Luke's Hospital was blocked by an invisible barrier which kept Janice from going in.

"Is there any counterspell or anything?" MacNeil asked.

She shook her head. "Not unless I find out who's doing all this. If I find out his name, I can force him to release the barrier." She paused a moment, frowning in thought, then said: "Look, Barton, you go ahead and go in. You're Uncle George's attorney, so you can ask to see him. Tell them I sent you. Meanwhile, I'll go down to the FBI office and get them stirred up over Aunt Susan's kidnapping. Okay?"

"Sure," said MacNeil. "Is there anything in particular I should find out?"

"Find out what the doctors think of that coma," she said. "I have a hunch that it's magically induced."

"Okay," MacNeil agreed, "you have Bevin drive you home as soon as that powder has settled. I'll go back to my office as soon as I've seen Dr. Perrivale. You can phone me there."

"Good. I'll see you then. 'Bye." Then, suddenly, she stood on tiptoe and kissed the end of his nose. "You've been wonderful," she said. Then she turned and marched off toward the Rolls-Royce.

MacNeil entered the hospital in a semi-daze.

An hour later, Barton MacNeil entered his office for the second time that morning. The clock on the wall said eleven-thirty.

"Anyone to see me?" he asked the secretary.

The girl looked prim. "A Miss Sonia Pellman. I told her you were out."

"What did she want?"

"She wouldn't say. But she insisted that it was important."

MacNeil looked at her narrowly. "You sound as though you didn't exactly approve of this dame. What's the matter?"

She looked even primmer than before. "Well," she said stiffly, "I'm no prude, and I certainly admit that sex appeal is a legitimate feminine weapon, but there are *limits!*"

"Overdoes it, huh?"

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She sniffed. "The girl positively *oozes* with sexiness. She acts as though her heels were turned out by the Timken Ball Bearing factory."

MacNeil nodded and headed for his office. He stopped at the door, turned, and said: "If she shows up again, send her right in. I'll dust off my couch."

"*Mis*ter Mac*Neil!*" she said in anguish as MacNeil closed the door behind him.

"Hel*lo,*" said the girl sitting behind his desk. Her voice was a throaty drawl.

MacNeil blinked. "How did you get in here?"

"Oh, I have my ways, darling," she said in a voice heavy with promise.

MacNeil blinked again, as though he were unsure of what his eyes told him. How could this be real?

The girl was sitting in his desk chair, her feet propped up on the edge of the desk. She was clad in—and only in—the sheerest black negligee Barton MacNeil had ever seen. Beneath the negligee, her body was as full of promise as her voice.

"I'm Sonia," she said.

"So I gathered," MacNeil said carefully. The girl's hair was a rich chestnut brown, and her eyes were the gray-green of a sleeping cat's. The mouth looked as though it almost had a life of its own.

MacNeil took a deep breath. "What do you want?"

"You," she said succinctly.

MacNeil started to sit down in one of the office chairs, and then decided that with this girl he'd probably be safer on his feet.

"Just what is it you want, Miss?" he asked in what he hoped was a calm, business-like voice.

"You," she repeated.

"Oh, yeah, sure. But what do I have to do for these favors? Jump out the window or something? Or—"

The intercom on his desk burped abruptly into life. "Miss Perrivale is here to see you, Mr. MacNeil," said his secretary's voice. "I told her to go on in."

"Yike!" said Barton MacNeil. He turned and headed for the door, but he was too late. Janice Perrivale pushed the door open and smiled.

"Hi. It took a little time, but I finally got the FBI to believe that the Perrivale case was something that they should look in on."

MacNeil nodded and swallowed. How was he going to explain Sonia's presence?

" 'Smatter?" Janice asked. "You look as though someone

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had slipped a Mickey in your bourbon."

MacNeil turned around slowly. He was beginning to wonder why Janice had not commented on the obvious presence of the partially clad girl behind his desk. His suspicions were correct. She was gone.

He walked over to the desk and looked behind it. He looked into the kneehole. Then he walked all around the room, looking everywhere.

The girl named Sonia had vanished, negligee and all.

"What on Earth is the matter with you?" Janice asked worriedly.

"Sit down," Barton MacNeil said. When she had made herself comfortable in the big upholstered visitor's chair, he explained.

Janice scowled. "Why, that hussy! That brazen—" She stopped. "So what did you do?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," said MacNeil. "That's when you came in."

Janice's eyes widened. "Where is she now?"

MacNeil waved his hand around the room. "You tell me."

"Minazel!" Janice said in a clear voice, "come here!"

The demon appeared. It didn't look any more pleasant in broad daylight than it had in the darkness of the basement. It licked its lips with its snakelike tongue and rolled its four eyes lugubriously. "What now," it said in a hoarse, plaintive voice.

"Give a sniff around," Janice said. "See if your brethren have been anywhere around in the last five minutes."

Minazel's large snout twitched. Hitching the crimson cloak closer about its body, the demon walked over to MacNeil's desk and sniffed again, more loudly this time.

Minazel went around the desk slowly, still sniffing. Finally, the demon stopped its bloodhound tactics, and the ghost of a smile came across its face.

"Not a demon," it said. "A human. But there is a definite demonic aura. Whoever this human is, she's sure leagued up with a demon—and a pretty powerful one, too."

"You mean—possession?"

"Sure," said Minazel happily. "The demon has control over the human. She's just a dupe, a tool. My, my." Minazel looked into unseen distances. "It's been nine centuries since I possessed a human. Don't often get a chance these days."

"Go to Hell," said Janice.

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The demon vanished.

"So we have a case of possession on our hands," said Janice in a troubled voice. "I wonder which demon it is? I wonder what its name is?"

"Probably Legion," said MacNeil. "This sort of stuff is beginning to give me the heebie-jeebies."

"I wonder what she's up to?" Janice thought aloud.

"She? You mean the girl? Or the demon?"

Janice waved a hand. "Even in possession, the demon is actually under the control of the human to a certain extent. They don't think they are, but they are. The ambitions of the human become the ambitions of the demon, only more exaggerated. The desires of the human are more exaggerated, too. But basically, deep down, the human being can't be made to do anything he or she doesn't want to do."

"So you think this Sonia dame has designs of her own, but her possession by a demon has twisted those plans so that she can't effect them?"

She nodded. "Something like that. And you can bet your bottom dollar that this Sonia dame is also mixed up with the ferryboats this morning and the barrier around St. Luke's. They're all tied together somehow, but I can't quite see how."

"Nor I," admitted MacNeil. "But if you hadn't come in when you did, she might have told me more."

"Really?" Janice asked icily. "And what of the price you'd have to pay?"

"Oh, now don't be that way. I'm a lawyer; I'd have gotten it out of her somehow, you can be sure of it."

Janice stood up. "*Well!*" she said. "I should *hope* so!" And she headed toward the door.

"Aw, now—hey!" MacNeil expostulated.

At the door, Janice turned, her eyes blazing. "*That* for you!" she said, snapping her fingers.

Barton MacNeil leaped three feet in the air. He felt as though he'd been jabbed in the *gluteus maximus* with an electric hatpin.

Janice slammed the door and was gone.

"You sure look silly," a voice snickered. MacNeil spun. Sonia was back. The only difference was that this time she was dressed in street clothes. They were sexy, but at least they were acceptable in public.

MacNeil forced the astonished expression off his face

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and tried to look self-possessed. "What do you want?"

"You've asked that before," Sonia pointed out. "And you got the same answer both times. Right now, though, all I want is a drink."

"The third time is a charm," said MacNeil. "The liquor is in the file cabinet over there, in the drawer marked with an ampersand."

The file drawers ran from *A* to *XYZ*, plus a final drawer marked *&*. Sonia opened it and peered inside. "I'll take Scotch," she said. "What 'bout you?"

"Bourbon," said MacNeil.

"Fine." She pulled out two bottles, both square shaped. One was Ballantine's Scotch, the other was Jack Daniels.

MacNeil watched her in wonder while she filled two glasses almost to the brim, leaving only room for one ice cube in each, which she got from the little refrigerator in the file drawer.

"That's a bit stiff, isn't it?" MacNeil asked as she handed him his.

"Drink it," she said. There was something about the way she said it that made MacNeil want to obey.

MacNeil sipped cautiously. "Now what?" he asked.

She poured a good third of the glass down her throat before she answered. It didn't seem to bother her in the least, except that her eyes brightened a little.

"Do you have my name in your files?" she asked.

MacNeil shook his head. "No. I never heard of you before this morning."

She went over and pulled open the *P* drawer. MacNeil didn't try to stop her. She'd soon see that there wasn't a Pellman in the place.

Finally she turned away from the drawer, looking thoughtful. "I wonder . . . Then her face brightened. "Finish your drink and let's go out for a cocktail."

MacNeil scowled and took another hefty sip of his ocean of bourbon on one rock. But he didn't argue with Sonia.

He was beginning to be irritated at having to follow dames around. Since morning he'd been led around by the nose by Janice, and now this gal was doing the same thing. The only difference was that with Janice he'd done it because he'd wanted to, but he was following this dame's lead because he was afraid not to. If she was really possessed by a demon . . .

He found that he didn't care to follow that thought.

Sonia tilted back her mag-

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nificent head to finish her drink, and while her eyes were thus focused on the ceiling, Barton MacNeil surreptitiously poured most of the remainder of his into a nearby flowerpot. There was no dirt in it, and the Scotch would probably ruin the artificial flowers, but Barton had to stay reasonably sober *somehow*. He'd already glurked down almost half the glassful.

He managed to get the glass back up to his mouth before Sonia lowered hers, and he polished off the last two drops as though he enjoyed them.

"Twenty-three!" said Sonia joyfully. "Skidoo! That's real booze!"

"It's wonderful," agreed Barton MacNeil half-heartedly. "At the price, it should be."

"But I don't like lawyers' offices," Sonia said decisively, putting her glass down on MacNeil's desk. "Let's go somewhere and have a drink. Know a good place?"

"Might try the *Stork*," MacNeil suggested uneasily. "That's a good place."

Sonia nodded decisively. "That's it, then." She opened her purse and pulled out what looked like a small *flacon* of perfume. But when she pulled out the stopper, he could tell by the smell that it was most definitely not perfume.

Sonia just held it in her hand while the faint but pungent aroma seeped into the air. At the same time, she muttered a few words under her breath.

Suddenly, Barton MacNeil felt oddly dizzy. Around him, the walls of the room went out of focus.

MacNeil looked around wildly. They were in an enclosure, about twenty-five feet square, surrounded on three sides by a heavy mesh fence and on the fourth side by a wall with gaping doors in it. There was a mesh roof overhead.

"Where are we?" MacNeil asked chokingly.

Sonia was looking equally surprised, but before she could answer, her words were cut off by a loud *squack!* Both of them jerked their heads around in time to see two huge white birds scampering away, heading for a pool of water in one corner of the enclosure.

"Storks!" MacNeil said suddenly, looking around again.

"Where are we?" Sonia asked, repeating MacNeil's query.

"I think," MacNeil said

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carefully, "that we're in the stork enclosure at the Bronx Zoo."

Sonia, who had replaced the stopper in the *flacon,* cursed in a shockingly unladylike manner and pulled out the stopper again. And again she muttered a few words of chant.

Barton MacNeil's surroundings went out of focus for the second time.

"Eeeeek!" screamed the reasonably pretty young lady who was suddenly standing in front of MacNeil. *"Ghosts!"*

And keeled over in a dead faint. MacNeil caught her before she hit the floor and held her there.

MacNeil was beginning to get the hang of this business of moving instantly through space from one place to another, so he was perfectly controlled when another young lady came bustling up officiously and said: "Here, here! What seems to be the trouble?"

MacNeil had already taken a quick look around. He and Sonia were standing in the middle of a large, pink-and-blue decorated salesroom. In the various glass counters and cases were tiny clothes of a myriad of types. Along another wall were cabinets containing what were obviously maternity clothes.

And on one wall was a large, but tasteful sign that said simply: *Stork Room.*

"Well?" asked the agitated floorgirl. "What happened to Helen? Why are you holding her like a sack of potatoes?"

"Because," said MacNeil, with dignity, "if I let go, she'd fall like a sack of potatoes. Isn't that obvious?"

Impressed by this logic, the girl nodded. "Why did she faint?"

"She looked at us as though we had suddenly appeared out of nowhere," the lawyer said with appalling candor, "and then she screamed and fainted."

By this time, several more of the clerks had bustled up, and then a tall, supercilious, suave-looking gentleman bowled his way toward them.

"I am the assistant manager," he said with condescending smoothness. "May I be of assistance?"

"Certainly," said MacNeil. "Very kind of you to ask. Here, this belongs to you, I think."

And before the startled assistant manager could move, the fainting clerk named Helen had been deposited in his arms.

"I'll—uh—take care of her,

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sir," said the suddenly deflated and confused assistant manager. "One of the girls will—uh—take care of you."

"We came here for some maternity clothing," said MacNeil, "but we can come back later when Helen is feeling better. We wouldn't allow anyone else to wait on us." At least, he thought, he could help keep the poor girl out of hot water. "Come, my dear." He turned around to Sonia, who was staring angrily at the little phial in her hand. Before she could unstopper it again, Barton MacNeil closed his hand around hers.

"No, my dear. No smelling salts for Helen. The gentleman knows much more about such things than we do." He turned back to the man, who was still holding the girl up and managing to look almost as dazed as she was.

"Tell Helen we'll be back for that two-hundred-dollar order tomorrow." Then he spun Sonia around and propelled her toward the door, reminding himself to remind himself to buy two hundred dollars worth of baby things and charge them to the Perrivale account.

Sonia giggled suddenly. "He certainly looked silly."

MacNeil propelled her out the door of the department store and glanced sideways at her. She was beginning to show some slight signs of the effects of the Scotch—but not much of an effect, considering the amount she'd guzzled.

"Let go my hand," said Sonia. "I'll get us to the *Stork Club* yet."

"We'll take a taxi," said MacNeil firmly. "Your magic goop has transported us to the stork enclosure of the Bronx Zoo and the *Stork Room* at Macy's. If I let you use it again, we'll probably end up at the maternity ward at Bellevue."

"Very damn irritating it is, too," said the girl, suddenly looking very sad. "Magic doesn't work right half the time." Then she brightened. "But the other half! Wowee!"

She was beginning to wobble a little now. That Scotch was really taking effect. Unfortunately, it was also beginning to have an effect on MacNeil. He'd had less than half the amount Sonia had swilled down, but he was feeling light-headed anyway.

He flagged down a cab and bundled the girl inside.

"Where to, buddy?" the cabby asked laconically. He turned around, and grinned suddenly in recognition. "You sure get around, buddy."

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It was the same driver who had driven MacNeil and Janice up to her place that morning. "No more than you," said Barton MacNeil woozily, "no more than you, old bug. Drive on."

"Sure, pal. Where to?"

MacNeil started to say, *"Stork Club,"* but Sonia beat him to the punch. She reached out, patted the cabby's cheek, and said: "Know where Maxie's Saloon is? Broadway at 114th?"

The cabby glowed at her pat, then scowled at her words. "There's somethin' familiar about the name, lady, but . . ." Then he shrugged. "We can try it."

The cab shot out into the Broadway traffic.

"Are you sure this was the corner, lady?"

Barton MacNeil looked fuzzily at the corner lamppost, where a blue-and-white sign proclaimed boldly that they were at the corner of Broadway and 110th.

"Mus' be 'round here someplace," Sonia was saying blearily. "Used to be here. You sure this is 114th an' Broadway? Doesn' look f'miliar. Used to go in Maxie's Saloon alla time."

Suddenly the cabby burst out laughing. "Boy, you sure are a kidder lady!" he bellowed between haw-haw's. "I thought that name was familiar. My old man used to tell me about that joint. Great place, he said, but they closed it down when Prohibition started." He guffawed again. "You sure are a kidder!"

Sonia scowled nastily. "There's a sign up there that says *West End Bar*. We'll go there. C'mon, MacNeil, pay off this clown and let's go."

Barton MacNeil had to help her out of the cab. He paid and tipped the cabby, then, weaving a little unsteadily, the two of them went into the bar.

It was a big place, neat and well-lit, but not too brightly. There was a big, oval bar that filled the center of the room, and there were booths around the mirrored walls. MacNeil had been there before and he liked the place.

He propelled Sonia into a booth and planted her carefully. "Howja feel?" he asked solicitously.

"Bubbly," she said happily. "Get me a double Scotch. You, too."

MacNeil started to protest, then he saw that she had opened her purse, so he thought better of it. God only knew what hellish brew she might pull out next.

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He walked over to the bar and told Morey, the bartender, that he'd like two double Scotches. When he brought them back, Sonia looked like she'd perked up a little.

He set the glasses down on the table, eased into the booth across from her and said: "Here. Now, if I'm not being too nosey, what the hell is this all about?"

"Drink up and I'll tell you," she said, setting the example by downing her double in short order. MacNeil followed suit, got up, got two more doubles, and came back again. He sat next to Sonia.

Emboldened by the warming liquor, he said: "I know what you are. You're a witch. Possessed by the Devil, that's what."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, then she laughed. It was a clear, throaty, contralto laugh, but there were nasty undertones in it.

"Is that what the little snip Janice told you?"

"Nev' mind how I know," MacNeil said, waggling a finger under her nose. "S'true, isn't it?"

Suddenly, she looked all woman, all desirable. "What if it is? Do you care?"

MacNeil looked down at his glass moodily for a second, then swallowed the amber fluid. "I don' know whether I care or not. Do you care?"

She polished off her own glass before she answered. "It doesn't bother *me* any. I really enjoy it."

"Les' get down to cases," MacNeil said. "You want something f'm me. What is it?"

"Get us another drink," she ordered. Then, before he could move, she leaned across the table and kissed him full on the mouth. The warmth of her body and the musky-sweet aroma of her perfume wreaked more havoc in his brain than the Scotch had.

He got up and made his way back to the bar for more Scotch.

Somebody lifted his head and shook him. There was a glass at his lips, and he sipped at it when someone ordered him to.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then his brain seemed to explode in a blinding flash of light.

He was still sitting in the *West End Bar.* Across from him, in the same booth he had been in with Sonia, sat Janice Perrivale and the hulking, three-hundred-pound butler, Bevin. Sonia was nowhere to be seen.

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But the miracle was that he, Barton MacNeil, was cold, stone sober, without a trace of a hangover.

"I'm sober," he said wonderingly. "What happened?"

Janice held a small bottle up to the light. It was partially filled with a deep violet powder.

"Essence of amethyst," she said. "It's been known for thousands of years that amethysts tended to nullify the effects of liquor. Uncle George and I found out what the active ingredient was. That's probably what your girl friend was using."

"You know about that?" MacNeil asked.

"Certainly I know. When you passed out, Morey, the bartender, called your office. We were there waiting, so we took the Rolls-Royce and came on up. Morey told me that you had been talking with this dame and kept calling her Sonia, so I put two and two together. She's our witch."

MacNeil nodded. "That's what she said." He told her about the attempts to get to the *Stork Club* by magical means, of the cab ride up, and of the conversation afterwards—at least, as much as he could remember.

"—I remember now that she didn't seem as drunk as she had been when she came in." He rubbed his head. "I wonder why she wanted to know about your uncle's will."

Janice suddenly looked excited. "Uncle George's will? What did she want to know?"

"I don't remember, exactly. But I do know that I didn't tell her anything about it. Drunk or sober, I can keep a client's confidences."

Janice looked troubled. "I know. I'm sure you can. But I'd give anything to know why she wanted to know and what she wants to do and what she's already done."

Bevin, huge and stolid, said: "Pardon me, Miss Janice." He looked at his wrist watch. "You were to call."

Janice got up quickly. "Oh, yes—the FBI. I told them I'd check with them about Aunt Susan." She ran to the telephone booth and closed the door.

"Drink, Bevin?" MacNeil asked.

Bevin considered thoughtfully, then said: "I think perhaps I shall, Mr. MacNeil. I'm not ordinarily a drinking man, but the events of today have completely unnerved me."

He looked about as nervous as a sleeping elephant.

They were sipping at a

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pair of brandys when Janice came back from the phone. A third one was waiting for her on the table. She looked absolutely dejected.

"They've found no trace of Aunt Susan," she said. She sat down and sipped at her brandy. "Poor old thing. I hope they haven't hurt her."

"They?" MacNeil asked.

Janice looked angry. "That Sonia and her cohorts, whoever they are. I'd like to get one good look at her. She's obviously the one who kidnapped Aunt Susan and put Uncle George in that cataleptic trance and put that invisible wall around the hospital so that I can't do anything for him."

"I thought you said that if you knew who'd put up that wall you could break it down," MacNeil said.

The girl gave a short hard laugh. "I have to know the real name of the person. You don't think her name's really Sonia Pellman, do you?"

And just like that, all the pieces of the puzzle fell together inside Barton MacNeil's mind. With sudden clarity, he saw exactly what had happened, all the way through.

He leaped to his feet. "Ye gods! Come on! Bevin, where is the Rolls-Royce? Around the corner? Get it rolling! We've got to get to St. Luke's! It's only a couple of blocks."

Janice said, "Wh-huh-uh?" in a spluttery voice, but she obeyed.

"I just remembered," MacNeil said as they raced for the door. "What this dame wanted to know was: Where had I put the will? And I told her it was in a safety deposit vault at the Chase Manhattan Bank."

The powerful Rolls-Royce pulled up in front of the hospital, slid to a halt in a no-parking zone, and stopped. Three people barreled out of it as though jet-propelled and slid to a stop in front of the door.

Janice pulled a vial of liquid from her purse, sprinkled some on the doorway, muttered a few words, and then put out her hand.

"It's gone," she said. "You had the right name, all right. Come on!"

They sprinted through the doorway and headed for the elevator, the hulking, but fast-moving Bevin charging in the fore to bowl over any opposition they might encounter.

MacNeil had briefly explained his hypothesis on the way over in the car, and Jan-

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ice had verified the few details he hadn't been sure of.

They reached the floor where Dr. Perrivale was confined without running into any opposition. The duty nurse looked startled and called after them as they raced by, but they ignored her.

They flung open the door of Dr. Perrivale's room and went inside. Except for the recumbent figure of Dr. Perrivale, sheet-covered on the bed, the room was empty. Janice ran over to the little old magician. After a moment's examination, she sighed in relief. "He's still alive. She hasn't been here yet."

"It would take her a while," MacNeil said. "I didn't tell her *which* Chase Manhattan Bank, and even with magic, it'll take her a little while to look in all of them. Unless she hits the right one right off the bat, which she obviously hasn't been able to do."

"We'll wait for her," said Janice. "Bevin, stand outside that door. Don't let anyone come inside unless you have to."

"I shall endeavor to do so, Miss Janice," said the taciturn giant. The duty nurse was outside the door, shouting something when Bevin opened the door. Like a gentle bear, he pushed her aside and closed the door.

Janice took an atomizer out of her purse—a little gold-and-glass thing that looked as though it held Chanel No. 5—and sprayed a cloud of vapor over herself. She vanished.

"Hey!" said Barton MacNeil, startled.

"I haven't gone anywhere," said Janice's voice from empty air. "It's invisibility spray. Here."

There was another hiss, and the lawyer suddenly felt as though he were floating in air. He couldn't see his feet or any of the rest of his body. He swallowed hard and tried not to look down.

"This way, we can take her by surprise," said Janice.

They weren't a moment too soon. One minute the room seemed empty. The next minute, the girl who had told MacNeil that her name was Sonia Pellman was standing there.

She stepped over toward the bed where Dr. Perrivale lay. The light in her eyes was unpleasant to look at.

She bent over the bed and smiled evilly. It was the first time MacNeil had ever seen anyone really smile evilly. Up to then, he'd thought the term was overly melodramatic, but

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now he could see that it was perfectly possible.

"So," the girl said in a soft whisper. "You thought you could get away with cutting me out of your will, leaving me with almost nothing. We shall see, my dear George Perrivale." Something shining and bright was in her hand. She began to raise it.

MacNeil was never sure of exactly what happened next. He heard Janice's voice shout something, but the words were totally unintelligible. A cloud of golden smoke seemed to come out of nowhere, enveloping the girl who called herself Sonia.

She leaped back, screaming horridly, but the golden cloud followed her relentlessly.

Janice's voice was chanting something now—words and syllables that almost seemed to have meaning, but the actual sense was evasive.

Then, without warning, the golden cloud became tinged with orange and quickly deepened to a brilliant crimson billow of thick smoke that surged outward and filled the room. Then it vanished, completely and utterly, leaving the hospital room clear.

On the floor was a crumpled figure.

MacNeil suddenly found himself visible again. Janice reappeared, standing over the figure on the floor.

"You were right," she said softly. "It's her."

The door burst open.

"All right, all right! What in Tophet is going on here?"

It was Police Captain Gillin.

Outside the door, MacNeil could see Bevin standing mildly to one side, his huge hands high in the air while a police officer pointed a revolver at his barrel-like middle.

"What's the idea?" Gillin demanded. "You'll all go to the brig for this sort of thing." Then he looked down at the floor. "Who's the old lady?"

"That's my dear aunt," said Janice coolly. "Miss Susan Perrivale."

It was well after midnight before Barton MacNeil could sit down again at the Perrivale mansion and relax. Janice looked harried but beautiful, and Bevin the Impeccable was serving brandy-and-soda.

"Thanks for getting us out of that, Barton," Janice said feelingly. "But I still don't see how you knew it was Aunt Susan."

"She wanted the will—to destroy it," MacNeil pointed out. "His previous will had left everything to her because

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you weren't of age at the time he'd made it out. By the way, Bevin, how is Dr. Perrivale getting along?"

"I took him his Ovaltine in his bedroom an hour ago, sir. He's feeling quite well—but tired."

"I'm glad to hear it." As Bevin moved away with the tray, MacNeil turned to Janice. "She was the only one who could have benefitted by the total destruction of the will."

"Is that all you had to go on?" Janice asked.

MacNeil frowned a little. "Well, no. In my office, she took a drink, then said: 'Twenty-three! Skidoo!' At first I thought she was just being funny. But when she asked the cabby to go to a saloon that has been closed for forty years, I began to wonder. Unfortunately, I was too pickled by then for it to make any sense."

Janice nodded. "I still don't know exactly what happened. She must have been puttering around in the lab last night and done something wrong. She's not normally vicious—just a little feeble-minded. Somehow, she managed to get hold of a demon without knowing the protective spells. And the demon took over. That's the only possible way she could have regained her youth. If I'd seen her, I'd have recognized her immediately, because I've seen tintypes of her when she was young. That's why she stayed out of my way."

"What'll happen to her now?" MacNeil asked. "She's regained her proper age, but what about her mind?"

"She'll be just as she was before. A little crotchety and a little simple, that's all. It was the demon that made her do the things she did, although she had to have a jealous streak in her to begin with."

MacNeil chuckled. "I sure thought I'd die when Gillin saw an old woman on the floor dressed in that sexy dress." Then he looked up at her. "By the way, there's still one thing I don't get. What about those boats in the back yard? How does that fit in?"

Janice smiled. "She just didn't know how to handle magic, that's all. Remember when she told you it only worked about half the time? That was right after she'd tried twice to get to the *Stork Club* and ended up in two similarly-named places."

"That's right. So?"

Janice's smile then became broader. "So that's the way magic works. Very literally.

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Aunt Susan likes to read poetry—romantic stuff, modern stuff, any kind. And she's always said that she wanted fairies in the bottom of her garden."

MacNeil closed his eyes. "Oh, *no!*"

"Oh, *yes!*" said Janice.

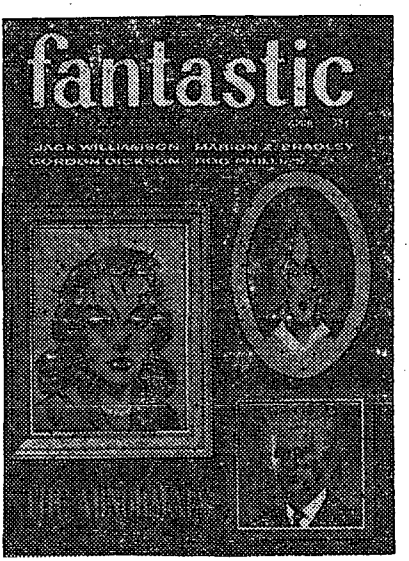
MacNeil sighed. "Well, she was good-looking when she was young, I'll give her credit for that." He grinned at Janice. "It must run in the family. She must have been a hellion when she was a gal. She seemed willing, ready, and able."

Janice came over and sat in his lap. "That runs in the family, too," she said deliberately.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

There's an all-star cast of authors in the April Fantastic—read all about it!



In alphabetical order (you know how temperamental writers can be!), they are: **Marion Zimmer Bradley,** who writes of the bride who had not only everything, but "A Dozen of Everything"; **Gordon Dickson,** contributing a horror gem, "After the Funeral"; **Harlan Ellison,** in an eerie venture into Earth's future and our planet's "Abnormals"; **Rog Phillips,** analyzing a weird group on a space station in "Keepers in Space"; and **Jack Williamson's** brilliant "Second Man on the Moon."

And, in case this isn't enough for one issue, there's a new and startling story, "The Arm of Enmord," by newcomer **Jack Sharkey;** a novelette by **Kate Wilhelm;** plus additional stories and all our regular departments.

Brilliant line-ups such as this you don't hardly find no more these days—so remember, the

April FANTASTIC will be on sale at your newsstand March 19. Tell your newsdealer to reserve one for you now.

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Out of the lights that blinded him, out of the pit that owned his soul, he thanked the alien gods he dreamed, and stayed

THE CAPTAIN OF HIS SOUL

By JACK SHARKEY

CAPTAIN Rensaleer strode back and forth on the deck of the control room, his boots swishing viciously with the whip-like lash of his angry pacing. Two days out from Venus, and the juggernaut beam completely gimmicked. "Damn those Venusians!" he snarled, his slightly unshaven cleft chin almost quivering. "Our force field should have *held!* How *could* they penetrate the amber flicker?"

"I'll check with Henry," said Morgan, getting up from his chair. "Henry's good at that sort of thing. He's made a lifelong study of beam diffusion."

"Excellent!" said Captain Rensaleer. "The very man! Ask him."

"Henry!" Morgan shouted. "The amber's gone blooey. It won't flicker, nohow, and the Venusian Maidens—"

"I know, I know," said Henry, with his usual calm pride in his abilities. He stepped to the immense control board, set his hands upon his hips, and studied the flashing lights that chased each other across the metal panels. "Ha!" he said, snapping his fingers. "It's the magnetic rheostat. Just needs a bit of adjusting, that's all."

"Darned if I know what you're talking about, Henry," Morgan mumbled. "Just so's you fix it, quick. The Venusian Maidens will—"

"A pox on the Venusians!" said Henry, his dextrous fingers seeking, finding and adjusting the cause of the trouble, in brief seconds.

"That's got it!" Morgan

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called, gratefully. "Keep it just like that."

"Henry!" Captain Rensaleer's rich baritone voice was mildly chiding. "You shouldn't make up your own terminology to impress Morgan. Why didn't you just tell him the switch was off?"

"Oh . . . *you* know." Henry sighed, sitting back in his chair. "If I told him exactly what was the matter, he'd begin to think maybe *he* could handle this job as well as I can, and . . ." Henry's voice broke a little, "I *need* this job. If I got fired, there's— Well, there's just nothing else I *can* do but keep the control board functioning."

Captain Rensaleer shook his head and looked fondly at Henry. "Not while I'm captain of *Argo III,* Henry," he assured the little old man. "You need never worry about Morgan taking over."

Henry sighed in relief and smiled a bit easier. "Thank you, Captain Rensaleer, sir," he said, with doglike devotion. The ageless tiger of a man that was the captain merely grinned, showing his white, even teeth, and strode manfully away, his six-foot-four rock-hard frame loping easily across the bucking, heaving floor of the spaceship.

"Henry!" Morgan called, with ill-suppressed fury. "The asteroids are passing by *too fast! Too fast,* you stupid old fossil!"

"Sorry, sir!" Henry gasped. "I didn't notice the speed-regulation dial, sir." Henry fumbled with an iron wheel, his old, pale blue eyes glued to the dial until the needle slipped back where it belonged. "Is it all right now?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yes!" said Morgan. "And its lucky for you!" Morgan deliberately turned his back upon Henry and walked away in a huff.

"You see?" said Henry, miserably.

"I begin to," said Captain Rensaleer. "Morgan certainly *is* touchy. But he's just young. Thinks he knows it all. He'll never be *half* the man you are, Henry. No one knows the workings of the control board so well. Don't you worry. As long as I'm captain of—"

"*Argo III,*" Henry finished for him, tonelessly "I know, sir. Thank you, sir."

"What are you *doing* back there, sleeping?" Morgan cried. "You old fool, you'd better shape up quick, or you'll be bounced out of here so fast—"

"What's the matter?" Henry asked, terrified by the

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younger man's harsh tone of voice.

"The spotlights, that's all!" Morgan growled sarcastically. "Here's a landing taking place on an alien planet, and the pilot can't even *see* the place. More lights, you idiot!"

"Yes, sir," Henry said, choking back a sob as he pulled the main power switch. On the Venusian landscape, glorious rainbow shafts of light pulsated into blinding colors. Green, maroon and yellow-scarlet columns of raw light spilled and splashed off the rich verdure that was the surface of the planet Venus.

"Henry, you look tired," said Captain Rensaleer. "Why don't you go to your cabin and lie down? We'll be landing on Venus, soon, and you want to be fresh when we go out to greet the aliens."

"Oh, sir, I'd like to. I'd like to so very much!" said Henry. "It would be good to lie down and rest; I'm not as spry as I used to be. But Morgan would—"

"The hell with Morgan," said Captain Rensaleer. "You need your rest. Go lie down, Henry. That's an order!"

"Sir . . . Do you really think . . .?" Henry began, falteringly.

"Damn it, that *does* it! That just does it!" Morgan yelled. "Of all the stupid tricks. Here the Venusian Maidens are starting their Dance of Temptation and the stupid *asteroids* are back! I give up, I just give up!"

"Pay him no mind, Henry," said Captain Rensaleer. "We space explorers can't be bothered by the rantings of hired hands."

"But my job, sir! If Morgan speaks to Mr. Baylock . . ."

"The hell with Mr. Baylock, too!" said the captain, decisively.

"Oh, sir, do you really *think* so?" Henry had to brush a tear from his eye, brought there by sheer gratitude. "I'm so old and tired, sir. If only I could—"

"You can, Henry. It's easy," said Captain Rensaleer. "Here, just give me your hand." His strong, bronzed fingers were outstretched toward Henry's. "Here, it's just a short step up, old man."

"I—" Henry hesitated, withholding his hand. "I've never been on the deck of a spaceship before, sir."

"There's nothing like it, Henry. Nothing in creation like it. To stride the decks of a ship, sailing anywhere in the universe you choose, slave to no man. It'll make you ten years younger."

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Henry's hand was slowly, as of its own volition, reaching for Captain Rensaleer's waiting fingers. "Only ten, sir?" he asked.

"Dash it all, man, you can be any age you want on *my* ship! Come, come! I haven't got all night. Give me your hand."

"Yes, sir!" said Henry, gripping the other's hand tightly. He closed his eyes, felt the easy strength with which Captain Rensaleer lifted him clear of the chair, up, up onto the deck of *Argo III*.

"What's this about Henry?" asked Mr. Baylock, with some surprise.

Morgan's face was a study in puzzlement. "I don't know, sir. The last time I saw him, the girls were rehearsing their dance number for the landing scene, and Henry goofed and started the asteroids moving again, from scene four. We had to stop rehearsals dead to get things running again."

"But Henry, what about him?" asked Mr. Baylock.

"When I last looked at him, he was staring into the air in front of him. Then when I looked back, he was gone. Poof. Just like that."

"Well, Henry's kind of old," said Baylock. "Probably got scared when you yelled, and hightailed it for home."

"Guess I *was* kind of harsh on the old guy," Morgan admitted, "but when you're trying to direct a musical and the man at the control board starts dropping cues, well—"

"Hey," Morgan gave a short laugh, "I don't even know the guy's last name."

"Rensaleer," said Mr. Baylock. "Henry Rensaleer."

Morgan got the number and dialed. He could hear the buzzing in the earpiece as Henry Rensaleer's distant phone rang. And rang. And rang . . .

THE END

A QUERY FOR READERS

Seldom does a magazine deliberately run two stories by the same author in one issue. We did, this month, for a reason. The preceding story by talented new writer Sharkey is serious, even tragic. The following story by Sharkey is bright and funny. We'd like you to tell us in which vein you prefer Sharkey. One? Both? Neither?

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THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION

By JACK SHARKEY

Some men are unhappy because they can't get women to fall for them. Not so with Mr. Grigsby. For him the problem was the reverse.

I *STILL* don't see the basic factor involved!" Petrie said in a near-whimper, unable even to finish his dessert, so great was his self-abnegation.

Cholmers, who had been monopolizing the conversation up until the arrival of his demitasse, smiled paternally at the thinner man and began to stir his second spoonful of sugar into the slightly greater volume of dark coffee in the tiny cup. "I'm beginning to think you know nothing *whatsoever* about the case." He chortled, setting his chins to wobbling animatedly.

"It's easy for *you* to talk, Oscar," said Petrie, irritably. "You're the one making money off Grigsby. The *only* one, I might add."

"Ah well." Cholmers sighed, expansively. "Some men are just born lucky, I guess."

"You certainly helped your luck along, Oscar." Petrie's tone was peevish and barely hid the suggestion of a holier-than-thou sniff. "Just think if you'd been out of matches!"

Cholmers set down his demitasse with a brittle clatter. "I resent your implication, Farnsworth!" he snapped, righteously. "The burning of that newsreel film was an accident."

"A mighty *fortunate* accident!" Petrie amplified.

"I won't deny *that*, old man," said Cholmers with a hearty chuckle. "I've certainly—as they say—risen in the ranks since the incident of the elevator. Ha, ha, ha."

Petrie, elbows braced upon the glossy surface of the

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booth's table-for-two, let his chin sink almost on a level with his strawberry chiffon pie as he clasped his long, knuckly fingers atop his egg-shaped head. "You know," he sighed, almost to himself, "it doesn't seem fair, somehow. *I* was Grigsby's doctor. *I* performed the plastic surgery . . . such as it *was*, anyhow. *I* was the first one to note the reactions of the female personnel at the hospital . . . Why should *you* have been the one to profit by Grigsby's face?"

"Luck," said Cholmers, contentedly. "Just luck."

"And a small bit of arson," Petrie insinuated, sadly and without rancor. Before Cholmers could bluster a denial, Petrie pursued his topic once more. "If I only knew *why* the reactions happened as they did. I know *what* a glimpse of his face does to women, but I don't know *why* it does it."

"Perhaps you are one of those persons who does not realize that cliches *are* cliches solely because they express some truth so perfectly that any other phrasing would seem labored," said Cholmers, with a most maddeningly patronizing air. "Yet I know for a fact that the whole business of Grigsby's face can be summed up in a statement so common as to be assured a prominent place in our heritage of language, Farnsworth. Sometime, somewhere, there must have been another person similarly afflicted—if I may use so onerous a term for what is undoubtedly a priceless gift—and this person's face gave rise to the saying. The person, the face . . . both were lost in antiquity, not to be even conceived of by modern man until the advent of Grigsby. And then— Well, the cliche is so apt that it *proves* the existence of some latter-day Grigsby, that's all; else how could the statement have first been coined?"

"*What* statement?" said Petrie, with quivering frustration.

"Let us," said Cholmers, igniting the tip of an evil-looking cigar, "review the case, shall we?"

Petrie sighed, slumped a bit further and, staring up at his luncheon companion over the whipped cream billows atop his pie, resigned himself to an extended lunch hour. "By all means," he muttered, despondently.

"Gordon Grigsby's face was an ordinary face. Nothing in the least outstanding about it until that happy day when he dawdled too long beneath his

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ultraviolet lamp and overcooked it. And even then, he might have been able to return it to normalcy had he not somehow confused the bottle of sun lotion with the liniment. And even *then,* when he came shrieking into the hospital, some semblance of his former features might have been salvaged had he not managed to get his head wedged in the door of the elevator shaft as the car was descending . . ."

"Don't remind me!" Petrie shuddered. "My stomach still goes queasy when I think of that sunburnt, raw, bloody horror."

"And yet you were man enough to operate upon it."

"I couldn't pass up a mess like that," Petrie admitted, with a small flush of pride. "No reputable plastic surgeon could. There wasn't a particle of it that hadn't been ruined by his triple series of accidents. A face like that— It was a *challenge!*"

"And then came the fateful day when the gauze and cotton were removed, and you gazed upon your creation, you old Frankenstein, you!"

"What a day *that* was!" Petrie reminisced, his eyes, despite their circumflex look, twinkled with suppressed merriment. "It was all right for a moment, of course— Mrs. Baines was assisting me, and all she did when she saw his face was grunt and then go about her work. But when Miss Treadwell walked in—"

Cholmer snickered. "I can imagine. Wish I'd been there."

"There she was, flat on the floor, out cold. Just plain *scared* unconscious by that face I'd given Grigsby."

"How many children *does* Mrs. Baines have?" asked Cholmers.

"Six," said Petrie. "And one on the way."

"Fine nurse, that woman," said Cholmers. "Let me see, Mrs. Fritch didn't faint either, did she!"

"No," said Petrie. "She came in, all starch and efficiency in her clean uniform, fresh from her honeymoon, and she never even blinked an eye. Of course, I didn't know about Grigsby's peculiar selectiveness at that time; I just assumed that Mrs. Fritch had a stronger stomach than Miss Treadwell. It was only afterward that Mrs. Fritch discovered that she was—"

"Pregnant," said Cholmers. "Yes, I know. Marvelous luck for me, Grigsby's escape from the hospital. Though I can't blame him. The poor man simply wanted to get home, you know. And to be kept

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there, day after day, without a word of explanation . . ."

"You were a fool to rely on the woman at the desk to report any attempt on his part to leave the premises. You should have chosen a man, or at least a woman who'd had children."

"Well, it's too late, now," Petrie said, with a shrug. "I just wasn't thinking. I guess I never really believed what he could do until the near-panic in that theatre where the newsreel was shown."

"And again my luck held true. I'd skipped seeing patients that day, of course, or I wouldn't have been in the theatre. But when that newsreel came on, and Grigsby, hurrying homeward past the camera, happened to turn his face toward the screen . . ."

"I can imagine the chaos," said Petrie. "The shrieks of women, the anxious cries of the men with them, a crushing exodus up the aisle prevented only by the fact that half the patrons were unconscious."

"It was a day to remember," said Cholmers. "Lucky for me the newsreel company was local, and that was the only copy of the film in existence. When it burned, of course, that destroyed the only photograph of the new face of Grigsby. Except the one *I* have, of course."

"As an obstetrician I realized his potential at once. I went to his home, took his picture, and then hustled him off to another plastic surgeon to have your work undone."

"Who could have thought it!" Petrie mused, "An *instant* test for pregnancy. No rabbits, no frogs, nothing but a photograph. Just whisk it in front of your patients and if they didn't faint, you knew at once that they were heading for motherhood."

Cholmers smiled. "It's built me a fine reputation. Same-Day Service is my motto." He began to get up.

"But wait!" Petrie said, quickly. "You haven't explained just *how* his face works when they see that photograph. What about that cliche you mentioned?"

"Oh, that!" said Cholmers. "Quite elementary. Grigsby had a face that only a mother could love."

"Good heavens!" Petrie gasped, so shaken by the revelation that he departed without paying, leaving Cholmers to square the check.

THE END

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THE LAST HERO

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

He was a man who lived in two worlds, fascinated by one, haunted by the other.

LARAMIE never ceased to marvel at his aim. It seemed he *couldn't* miss. The burnished six-shooter in his capable brown hand spat bullet after bullet, and with each recoil a rustler tumbled from the saddle and became a mound of dusty denims on the hillside.

He could hear Ellen's excited breathing just behind him. He could almost feel her small hand pressing softly on his shoulder. He stole a glance at her, between rustlers, and her fair loveliness made him wince with ecstatic pain. As always, she was smiling at him courageously; as always, her liquid eyes were filled with love and admiration. Her hair was an aureate handful of sunlight, a symbol, in its brightness and purity, of the West he had come to love.

Another rustler bit the dust, then his pistol hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. Quickly, Laramie exchanged the gun for the one Ellen had reloaded, and again the rustlers felt the fury of his lead. But there were so many of them, riding over the vast plain and up the rocky hill, that he knew he couldn't hold them off forever, that sooner or later some of them would reach the outcropping behind which he and Ellen had taken shelter after the horse they were riding double had collapsed beneath them. And then—

Laramie shuddered — not from fear of death, but from fear of the fate worse than death that would befall Ellen

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if the rustlers captured them. No, he could never let that happen. Never. He reached up and patted her hand, trying to reassure her.

She sensed his thoughts. "Promise me you'll never let them take me alive," she said.

He evaded her noble request. "Don't give up yet, gal," he drawled. "As long as my ammo lasts, they'll never take us!"

But would it last? he asked himself, knocking three more rustlers from their saddles. And even if it did last, could he continue to hold the rustlers off till the posse arrived? As though in answer, his gun jammed, and with a groan of despair he grabbed the one Ellen had just finished reloading. He emptied it deliberately, and six more riders threw up their arms and toppled from their mounts. Their companions, however, seemed to divine that something was wrong, and, emitting a series of triumphant yowls, they came thundering up the hillside, lust and lechery shining in their eyes.

Laramie reloaded furiously, but haste made his fingers clumsy, and the chamber jammed. The dust of the approaching horsemen hovered over the hilltop like a malevolent cloud now, and the ground reverberated with the pounding of hooves.

Suddenly Ellen threw her arms around his neck and smothered his lips with a passionate farewell kiss. The kiss gave him the incentive he needed, and he stood up, exposing himself to the fusillade of enemy fire, and flung the gun straight into the face of the leading rustler. The fellow dropped from his saddle, and the horse next in line tripped over him, throwing its rider. A sort of *deus ex machina* chain-reaction ensued, horse after horse stumbling, rider after rider hitting the ground. But the dismounted rustlers were undaunted and they resumed their charge on foot.

Laramie thrust Ellen behind him, shielding her body with his own. Bullets whined all around him. One nicked his earlobe, another lodged in the flesh of his shoulder. Presently the rustlers were upon him and he was swinging savagely with his fists, hearing the crunch of smashed cheekbones and fractured jaws and broken teeth. But he was hopelessly outnumbered and he felt himself being driven back, inch by inch, to the cliff that comprised the other side of the hill.

He was about to give up

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hope, about to seize Ellen and leap with her to their deaths on the jagged rocks below, when he heard the thunder of hooves resounding over the plain and the staccato blasts of friendly six-shooters reverberating in the summer air. The rustlers heard, too, and they threw up their hands and cowered in a straggling line along the edge of the cliff as the posse, red handkerchiefs fluttering, *chaparajos* flapping, sombreros swinging triumphantly in sun-browned hands, breasted the hilltop.

Laramie was surprised—and a little apprehensive—when he saw Ellen's father dismount from a hard-breathing palomino and come walking toward them. He had not thought the white-haired old codger physically up to the rigors of riding with a posse, and his heart pounded in admiration for the Grand Old Man.

"You've saved our ranches, Laramie," the Grand Old Man said, as Ellen embraced him, "and you've saved my daughter from a fate worse than death. Never can it be said that I am unmindful of favors, or reluctant to reward those who perform them. Let bygones be bygones, my son. My daughter is yours and tomorrow you take over as foreman of the Bar-B-Q. I have spoken."

Ellen ran into Laramie's arms and he rejoiced in her warm, virginal loveliness. He bent and kissed her in the red radiance of the setting sun, the two of them silhouetted against the majestic backdrop of the rolling plain and the polychromatic sky—

Laramie could never understand why he invariably chose that particular moment to take off for town and go to a movie. It was a sort of conditioned reflex, he supposed; a re-occurring compulsion that was as much a part of his life as the open trail, the roundup, and beans and bacon cooked over a campfire in the light of the Western stars.

The theatre was the same—huge, empty, the projection booth suspended from the ceiling, the remnants of its broken ladder dangling tantalizingly thirty feet above the floor. Laramie remembered all the times he'd tried futilely to gain access to that lofty, all-important chamber so that he could deactivate the automatic projector, or at least insert a different film. He was sick of the same old movie, day after day after day. He knew the plot by heart and he loathed every

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second of the action. But still he kept coming, again and again and again . . .

He walked up the aisle, still savoring Ellen's kisses. An empty popcorn dispenser iridesced in a corner of the foyer and an equally empty candy machine stood forlornly by the door. The theatre proper was drafty and cold. The huge screen was lit up, a panorama of muted chiaroscuro, and the movie was just beginning. Reluctantly, Laramie identified with the only character—

A creature named Smith.

Smith walked down the littered street, carrying his club, glancing watchfully from side to side, listening, always listening. There was an occasional scurrying sound in the shadows, the sporadic howling of a distant dog-pack. Stars showed above a ragged skyline of brooding buildings, glittered now and then on the panes of a still-intact window. The November wind sent dead leaves rattling over broken walks and ruptured macadam, round the rusted hulks of cars. Smith shivered.

When he came to the corner with the S-bent lamppost, he turned. Lord, he was hungry! He was always hungry—hungry and cold and miserable. And he wanted a woman, and in this twilight world there were no women, nor men either, for that matter—except himself.

But there was food. The rats and the dogs had eaten up everything they could find, but canned food had proved to be beyond their ken. When he reached the supermarket, Smith stepped through the shattered display window and picked his way through the dark aisles. He knew from long familiarity the location of each item, and he chose beans and pears and beer. Then he crouched in a corner, still watching, still listening. He ate the beans by impaling them on his pocket knife. He used his fingers for the pears, scooping the dripping halves out of the can and shoving them into his mouth, tilting the can afterwards and draining the juice. When he finished, he gulped down the beer.

He hadn't intended to fall asleep, but the food and the alcohol, and the heavy tiredness that was always with him, combined, and he slumped down in the corner, still gripping his club. He thought evanescently of Ellen and the ranch and he wished desperately that the movie would end so that he could get back to being Laramie. If he had

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his way, he'd be Laramie all the time; but the movie kept intruding itself and he had to be Smith, whether he wanted to or not, till it had run its daily course. And it was a waste of time to try to return to the ranch ahead of time. He'd tried that once, but the action had only integrated itself into the plot and the movie had run its course anyway. The answer to his dilemma, of course, lay in the projection booth. If he could only gain access to it, he could turn the movie off and be rid of Smith forever. Off . . . or on? For a moment he felt dizzy. If he turned it off, would he cease to be Smith, or would he cease to be Laramie? He pressed his hands against his temples. Slowly, sanity returned. Why, he'd cease to be Smith, of course! Smith was the fictitious character, Laramie, the real one. What was the matter with him anyway? Presently his head bent forward till his forehead rested on his knees. His eyes closed—

The yelping of dogs awakened him. There were four of them in the dawn-gray street, sniffing the sidewalk that fronted the supermarket. They had his spoor, and he knew from past experience that it would be useless to try to outwit them. He stood up stiffly, raised his club. Terror numbed him as the first dog leaped through the broken window, then he reminded himself that this was, after all, only a movie, and that no real harm could befall him, and he caught the dog—a huge collie—squarely on the top of its head with his club. It dropped at his feet and in an instant the rest of the pack was upon it, tearing it to pieces, bolting its flesh, and Smith was running up the aisle to the street and then down the street to his apartment house.

Inside his apartment, he closed and locked the door. It was one of the few apartments in the building that was still habitable. He wondered briefly who had lived in it before, but he did not really care, and presently his thoughts drifted back to his own past. Flashback! he thought deliberately, as the memories of his wife and son straggled through his mind, and he wiped the memories away.

He lay down on the bed and dropped into a fitful sleep. But not for long. There was something he had to do, something even more vital to his continued existence than food.

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He arose, picked up his club, and descended to the street. The sky hung over the city like unwashed laundry. The wind was raw and whispered "winter." He slouched down the street, turned down a broad avenue. When he came to the half-demolished brick building, he turned up the walk. Towers, like steel, leafless trees, stood immobile in the gray afternoon light, some of them bent, some broken, a few still intact.

Inside, he descended to the subterranean control room. He checked the bank of dials and gauges, listened critically to the steady humming of the big generator. He made the few adjustments that were necessary, then he lay down on the battered couch and tried to sleep. Sleeping made the movie slip by faster, and besides, he was tired, he was always tired . . . Half-awake, half-asleep, he half-dreamed of all the shifts he had once put in, in this very room, of the shift in particular, when he had crouched behind the thick foundation wall and listened, terrified, to the sound and fury of Armageddon. Flashback! he thought again, and turned angrily on his side . . .

The windows were dirty with dusk when he awoke. He got up, checked the control panel once more, and left the building. He started walking. Dogs were barking in the distance and leaves rustled beneath his feet. He stopped in the supermarket for supper, then returned to the street. He walked along, whistling, "Home on the Range." Night had fallen, and the ragged sequence of lights supplied by the last generator straggled like incoherent morse code towards the last theatre.

His footsteps quickened. He no longer felt the cold, nor the loneliness, nor the fear. The marquee was an oasis of reassuring brightness, of twinkling, multicolored lights that spelled out *The Man With The Golden Gun*. He entered the foyer, hurried down the aisle between the rows of empty seats to the place where he always sat. The wide, rectangular screen was already flushed with technicolored reality. There were plains and mountains and rivers; valleys, hills, trees—

Laramie reined his horse on the lip of the valley. He shifted to a more comfortable position in the saddle, tilted his sombrero so that it shaded his keen gray eyes. There was a ranchhouse in the valley, and the green land for miles

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around was stippled with grazing cattle. In the distance a small town showed, and Laramie visualized swinging doors and gun fights, and beautiful women waiting to be fought for.

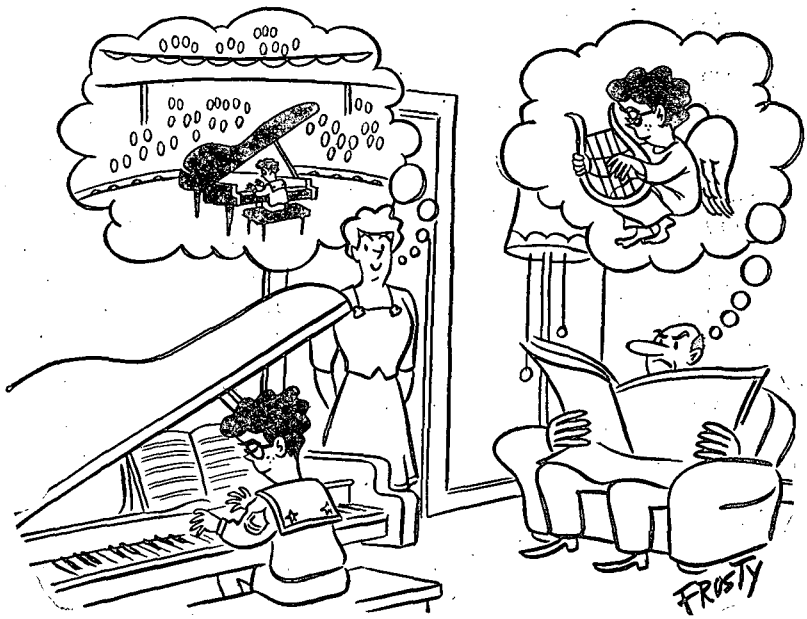
He spurred his horse gently, nosed it down the green hillside. He could almost smell the adventure and the romance and the happiness that would soon be his. And he promised himself that this time, when he took Ellen in his arms, he would *not* forsake her for a horror picture about the sole survivor of World War III.

But he knew he would. After an hour and a half, the reality of the western plains had an inexorable tendency to turn into the fantasy of the bombed-out city. Once, a long time ago it seemed now, things had been the other way around: the city had been the reality, the plains, the fantasy.

But if you were the last man in the world, you had to have something to live for, even if it meant sacrificing your sanity—

Besides, who was there around to call you crazy?

THE END



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She was plunged into a maelstrom of love and hate, of politics and war—of madness on a far-away world. She had many weapons: youth was one, beauty another, brains and bravery. But above all, she knew the secret of

THE GIRL OF MANY BODIES

By WILSON KANE

SHE was nearly replete and restored, her nude body humming with vital energy, when the power pack blew. The wild surging of unpolarized electric power nearly killed her before she struggled out of the wet harness of fine metal webbing. Naked, she staggered across to the main switch, cut off the current that agitated the fluid in the tub to a mad froth.

She stood shivering, trying to collect her shattered mental bearings. But— The damage had been done. Somewhere in the infinitely complex neuron network of her brain an important connection had burned out under the sudden overload. She didn't even know *where* she was!

Staring into the full-length mirror, beside which hung the freshly pressed uniform of a . . . what? Whatever rank she had held, she couldn't recall it! Dazed she sat down on the three-legged metal stool, fumbled with the objects lying on the low table before it. They had obviously been placed where she could see them during her . . . bath?

A *strange* bath that was! In a fluid not water, wearing an electrical metal harness that had robbed her of her identity! She looked blankly at the harness of woven wire and the full-length tub of blue fluid.

She picked up the objects on the table one by one: a ring, the green stone cut *intaglio* with a bafflingly familiar design—a stylized hornet; a small, gray, cloth-covered book which she opened. It

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contained her own handwriting; she made sure by using the pencil attached by a tiny gold chain. Names, addresses —scores of them. Men and women, and after each name was a little *fleur-de-lis,* or a darkly penciled triangle. Running her eyes over the names, hoping her memory would catch some familiar hook to hang her identity upon, she sobbed in despair and terror. For all the names and addresses meant to her, they might as well be a list of . . .

A voice called from beyond the closed door: "Have you gone to sleep in that *vi-eng* unit? I've read every silly interview in this Tele-fan magazine. I've even memorized the recipes!"

It was a male voice, biting, impatient, a very dislikable voice she decided. It would not be hard to kill him, when the chance presented. She sat there, staring at the sudden impulse to kill in her mind, amazed at the intensity of it, increasingly aghast at the character of this strange person she had become who could calmly contemplate murder. For some reason, still beyond grasp of her memory, she knew she was going to kill that man waiting so impatiently! So, she was either a murderess or a would-be murderess!

Frantically she searched the blank pages of her mind for other, similar thoughts. But— For all she knew, she might have killed dozens of men! With growing horror she stared down at the names in the little gray book, suddenly grown ominous and heavy in her damp, chilled hand. They might be names of victims or of victims-to-be, or both!

She stood up, examining herself sharply in the long mirror. She called out: "Be with you in a minute or two—" as she stepped close to the glass, running her hands down over her sleek flanks, over her flat, clean stomach, touching her firm, round breasts. The long curves of her body were extremely beautiful, if too muscular. She could find no complaint with the care her unknown self had taken of her physique. Quite the reverse, she must be a very active, athletic sort of person.

Her face, a bewildered-eyed stranger's face, was made particularly strange to her because the skull was shaved smooth as an egg. The balanced neck, holding the small head so proudly and defiantly, as if facing peril had become

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a habit, told her she was a stubbornly courageous person. The full, wide-lipped mouth, the little scar on the high curve of the cheekbone . . . startled, she looked closer. There *was* no scar!

The smooth planes of her pale cheeks ran unbroken by any blemish, up into the tiny dark points of almost invisible hair-roots. Evidently she was dark-haired. She looked under her arms, ran her hands over her body. . . . There was not a single hair to be found on the smooth, gleaming flesh.

Small ears, with long lobes pierced. She fingered the tiny holes idly. Strange they should be pierced. She was sure they had never been pierced . . . still she knew the ears did not seem her own without ear-rings. It was confusing, trying to recall things, like trying to move a limb after amputation.

A good enough face, probably beautiful under the right circumstances. A woman could do a lot with that perfect cheek line, the delicious round point of the chin beneath the curve of sultry, generous lips. A nice mouth, a mouth that liked life and people and kids. . . . A pang at her heart told her she wanted a child, children, sometime. It told her too, that face couldn't possibly belong to a murderess.

Absently she began to slip on the sheer underthings, the stockings that were not stockings, but ballet dancer's sheer, waist-length tights. Funny thing, a woman wearing a dancer's tights for stockings. She must be a dancer—yet the rest of her clothing didn't agree with that impression. The plain uniform skirt of burnt-orange with a blue side-stripe—was not a skirt. It was a pair of breeches, and she found herself slipping them on with the ease of long habit. She felt snug at the waist. Her hand went automatically to the little, concealed pocket where a tiny *shocker* snuggled flatly, felt reassuringly of the fine chain that hung inside the waist-band, by which you could pull the shocker into your hand without a fumble. The little thing would immobilize a man with one touch of the bean, a silent *click* and he would melt down into inert flesh. How did she know that and still not know why it was there?

The uniform blouse of gray looked too tight. Her breasts would never fit inside that . . . She held it up, found the breast-band inside which obviously was to compress her too obvious charms. She slip-

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ped it on, snapped the band tight around her bust. She hesitated for only a moment.

A mannish tie completed the erasement of her most easily discerned difference from the opposite sex. The well pressed jacket with the padded shoulders fit to perfection. The silver braid on the shoulder was meaningless to her, though she knew it should tell her rank.

Bending forward, she rubbed her still damp scalp with a towel, then picked up the tiny, soft blond wig. She slid it on with the ease of long practice, molded the edges into invisibility on her head with swift dabs of paste from a jar.

What in Heaven was she doing, making up like a man?

The little golden mustache was as difficult as false eye lashes, but no more so. It gave her a dashing, devil-may-care masculinity. She could love a man with a mustache like that! Suddenly she shuddered with revulsion. She *had* loved him!

That wig had been the human scalp of a man! The mustache itself was complete with the skin of a dead man underneath! A man it seemed she must have killed? Impossible! But the evidence was there; she did not have to tear the revolting scalp off and examine it. She knew!

"Clare" set the officer's cap on the shining scalp of cropped golden hair with a sharp tap, just enough of an angle to be the real "Haber's" rakish self, and her heart was turning over inside her knowing she had loved Haber, was now impersonating him. There was a horror and a fear in her with the knowing, but the curtain of her memory would lift no further.

Swiftly she pocketed the loose change lying there, the roll of green credits, the phial of transparent poison capsules, almost invisible in their terrible deadliness inside the little spring-top bottle. Just a touch, and one of the unseeable little deaths would slip into her palm. Deaths, each one could be! Probably *would* be, if she didn't stop this *creature* she seemed to be.

With cold fingers she buckled the holster about her slim waist. Cautiously her hand touched the butt of the weapon. She drew it out, pondered the exquisite design on the silver butt-plates, the mysterious double cylinder, the deadly looking muzzle. She hefted it gingerly, noting the perfect balance. It was an ex-

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pensive, beautifully designed weapon. But what in Mary's name was it? She'd never seen one before.

She stepped into the soft brown boots, tugged them up about her capable calves, *Sue Tenet* liked boots like that... Ah! There it was—her *own* name. But once more her memory balked. That was all. She knew her name, nothing else.

Disappointed, she turned for a last over-all inspection of her bewilderingly masculine regalia. Apparently she was a woman who habitually masqueraded as a man, she knew how so well!

Everything looked all right. She pocketed the little gray book and put on the strangely alien green ring. She walked to the door and opened it.

The man on the chaise lounge dropped the magazine, stood up, buckled his own holster about a similarly uniformed waist. His voice was steady, a deep but cold monotone, and Sue noticed that his expression was a kind of vacuous, emotionless mask. She was unable to relate the *new* expression on his face with her past experience. She was lost in a daze of wonder, unable to remember why she was here. The man was saying in a voice vaguely and frighteningly familiar, like her own voice coming from another, a voice she knew she must obey, *would* obey, *had* obeyed since time began . . .

"We're scheduled for an operation in fifteen minutes. I've hired a sea-sled for the job, one of those with helicopter blades for limited flying. Our next move must be to eliminate Renison. Do you understand?"

The man's eyes glittered on her with a curious golden flickering in their black depths. She felt he was not at all sure of her, was only testing her out to determine her reactions and her obedience. She felt he must know she was different, but could not analyze why he should know anything had happened. She did not answer, her eyes refusing to linger on the singularly frightening face. She preceded him through the door and he locked it behind them.

As they moved down the corridor to the street, the man said: "You will obey me, just as before?"

She glanced at him. His voice *had been* her *own*. More confused than ever, she replied with an involuntary reaction: "I will obey, Master, just as before." Before what? Before the change in her

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bath! Before she had been he . . . Before something in him had been in her . . . She reeled dizzily, trying to understand the complexities her memory was trying to thrust out at her, but so bafflingly as to be incomprehensible.

The man was nodding. "That is good. I was not sure your nature would still coincide with my will, now that I have been forced out of your body and into this revolting male's. Obey, and I will reward you. I don't understand the strange thing that occurred in your body in the *vi-eng* bath, or I would never have taken the bath. However, it shall change nothing."

Inwardly Sue rebelled, her mind almost shouting: "That's what you think! There's been a change in me, never fear, and I understand it less than you, but when I *do* understand it . . ." Why was she so angry, so seemingly outraged? What imposition, so *personal* so *intimate* had he, no, *it,* made upon her? Inner mind raging, Sue walked calmly beside the man, schooling her appearance to acquiescence, her face registering only mild, unthinking acceptance.

Kyle Renison, taking his usual late afternoon solitary walk along the seawall of Kingsend, watched the sea-sled windmill down, circle, land on the long, soft swells of the bay. Some silly stranger who didn't know it was dangerous to monkey around the seawall here near the palace. The mid-afternoon express flyer was due to zoom out of the underground hangars, through the big sea-gate and take off across those same swells! The airwash alone would overturn the sea-sled, if the rockets didn't burn them to death, the racket they made would scare them to death. There was nothing he could do, he realized. If he waved, they would probably pull in closer to see what he wanted. Perhaps they'd move aside, now they'd landed . . .

But they were scudding in closer, skipping from wave to wave, coming fast, right toward him. The man was monkeying with a small black mechanical device. It reminded him of his secret model of the Hammer! But that was a silly notion; the invention was safe in the Prince's vaults under the palace behind him.

Quite suddenly Kyle decided it might be better to listen to his silly thoughts than to be dead. He turned and leaped from the top of the wall to

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the green sod twenty feet below, on the city side. He was out of sight of the pair on the sea-sled now, and he landed on all fours, scuttled along the bottom of the wall, straightening and running hard. His head twisted back to watch as he heard the familiar hiss and sudden blast. Impossible, but . . .

Three separate jagged bolts licked across the top of the wall he had just vacated. The light was blinding. The air crashed back together with a sullen, deafening thunder. Where he had stood as the man took aim was only a ten-foot smoking gap in the smashed seawall.

The Hammer was an excellent weapon!

Kyle, running hard toward the palace across the open lawn, realized that far better, now that his invention had been used against himself. But how had the model gotten out of the vaults and into a stranger's hands? Somebody was going to get their ears burned! He had an idea he would have to choose between telling the Prince what he thought of him and keeping his job.

Was the Prince trying to have him killed with his own invention? It didn't make sense. Not Sten Rysto, the young ruler, his sister's husband! But if *not* that, then what had happened to give the Hammer into an assassin's hand? It wasn't like Sten. He had known him all his life. It was out of character. Nevertheless, he had to know what it was all about . . .

Swiftly he threaded his way through the under-corridors, up the wide, ornate stairs into the old palace itself. The Prince was probably closeted with some of his councillors, at this hour. Behind him he heard the roar of the express. Undoubtedly his would-be killers had departed, else be killed by the express. They had known where to find him, precisely; would know when the express was due . . .

As he expected, he found the Prince with his five councillors and his wife. He strode angrily up to face the ruddy-cheeked, youthful scion of the old and noble Rysto line.

"What have you done with the Hammer?" he demanded, anger and shock making his voice hoarse.

The Prince looked surprised, and confused. "I meant to tell you today," he said. "That's why we were having this meeting."

"You meant to tell me

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what?" Kyle's voice became low and tense.

"I've arranged to finance our needed increase in armament. I sent Captain Haber, remember you asked what became of him, to find out what he could raise on the sale of the Hammer. I sent him to the other side of Sirius, far enough that it is certain the thing will never be used against us. We should get enough out of it to stock our treasury as well as our arsenal for any eventuality that may arise."

Kyle's greatest fear was being realized, he understood swiftly. This youngster, who ruled in place of his superannuated father, the old King, had become over-ambitious. In possession of the Hammer, it had become possible to smash any resistance from his neighbors, change Lansea's limited monarchy over subjects who could overthrow him any time the whim struck them to an absolute empire over the three worlds. Why else would he want new armaments on such a vast scale? There was no "eventuality that might arise . . ."!

Kyle suddenly felt consuming anger. The Hammer was his own invention, a gift to his country. This smiling pipsqueak on the big chair behind the council table had no right to sell it without first consulting him! Kyle slowly removed the decorative small sword that marked his honorary rank as a Captain of the King's Guard. He seldom wore a uniform anyway, he found himself thinking as he flung the sword down across the table with a bang.

"I guess that does it, your Highness. I'm quitting, and you might as well know where I stand. I don't like things I give to my country to be traded off without even consulting me. The Hammer was to be used only to protect Lansea and the three worlds, and for no other purpose. I didn't want my work to be responsible for deaths through all the known universe. Now it will get into the hands of every would-be warlord, sooner or later. Good-bye!"

As he turned away, he remembered what he had come for, turned back suddenly, his face still flaming with anger. "You have barely completed the sale of the Hammer, to a *remote* buyer, when, not fifteen minutes ago, somebody focused it on me from over the seawall. There's a nice big gap where the next tide will inundate your lawn, *Highness."* Kyle gave the title

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a sneering emphasis that brought a dark flush to the Prince's already florid features.

The Prince leaped to his feet, his brown eyes amazed, his handsome face portraying mingled anger, embarrassment, confusion.

"Kyle! Captain—man! The Hammer isn't sold yet! Haber only went to find out what it's worth in trading credits. I meant all the time to discuss the matter with you before the deal was actually made, but I wanted figures and facts to show you, to overcome your objections. Clare Haber was a close friend of yours, would be the last man to betray you. If someone is using the Hammer, trying to kill you, it's without the knowledge of either of us!"

Kyle's disbelief showed on his face. He turned away, his heart heavy with a sense of betrayal that no words could dissipate. That weapon could have meant certain security and peace for Lansea. Instead it was already in the hands of murderers, was going to mean new wars across the galaxy as its use spread. Only by harsh discipline and extreme care could they have kept its existance a secret. Yet, the ambitious young Prince, usurping his father's powers, had flung it out into that whirlpool of greed, the crushing, warring rivalry of the big factory planets who owned the starships, exploiting and spoiling wherever they touched.

But before he could stalk angrily from the room, he saw his sister, Alfreya, moving to intercept him. His heart hurt even more, for she must have known! Her husband, the Prince, told her everything, usually. Yet she had not told Kyle what was afoot. This conspiracy against him of the two he trusted most gave him a deep nausea. He listened to her voice with difficulty.

"Kyle, wait! We didn't tell you because we knew you'd object. We wanted to do the best thing for Lansea, for the people. There's so much the traders can give us! We wanted to show you their offer before you refused the idea, and we didn't want everyone knowing. We kept the secret, knowing it might hurt you, but waiting for Haber's return. Only I and the Prince knew where he was going, or why. The fewer to know, the safer for all."

Kyle thrust her aside with a slight push, went past her as if not recognizing her, not hearing her. He was about to make his way out of the room,

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but the picture of his sister's face in his mind held him there, with his back to the ruler. His effort to hold his temper, to think clearly, brought the veins out in his temples, caused the muscles on his jaw to quiver. He turned jerkily to the Prince.

"You could tell a woman your secrets, but not me! I only invented the Hammer. I've no right to decide what's to be done with it. You're not fooling me, Sten! You mean to have the traders equip you to take over the three planets under one rule, and that yours! You knew I'd find a way to stand as a barrier, to thwart you. Well, have your damned war, butcher your neighbors, destroy the fifty years of peace on the three worlds! I hope you get your bellyful! I hope you stick to the advice of women, too. It'll make your success certain. Good-bye, you would-be Emperor. You can start counting your enemies now—with me as the first on the list!"

Renison, beside himself, turned a bitter face to his sister's stricken countenance, standing beside him like a beautiful statue, her cheeks pale as death and her blue eyes full of hurt and held-back tears.

"As for you, Alfreya, you've worked against me for the last time. You're no sister of mine! I'll change my name! I hope I never have to look at you again."

He took another long stride toward the big double doors, but Alfreya seized his arm, held him, her voice shaking with emotion. "You don't understand, Kyle! You're jumping to conclusions, and they're as wrong as they can be. You just don't know the circumstances. *Hannigan* said the *Hornet* would get the plans from the shops one way or another, sooner or later. This was the only way we could really make sure Lansea got adequate protection from the Hornet!"

Kyle laughed bitterly. "The Hornet, the Hornet! That bugaboo! He's nothing but a ghost, a tale with no substance. There's no reality behind the things they attribute to his work. So Hannigan *knows* too. But not me! Well, how would you like it if I looked up this alleged Hornet, and roused a Hornet's nest around your ears? How would you like that, my so-called friends!"

He tore his arm from her grasp, wheeled, strode away. The Prince held out one hand in an ineffectual gesture, then

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called out: "When you cool off, Captain Renison, come back and get your sword! It will be waiting for you. I need you more than ever now! Haber is overdue . . ."

But Captain Renison was gone, and his sword lay on the ornate royal council table. Beside it lay a medal the Prince had just had struck for him, but hadn't time to bestow. It stated: "For services vital to the security of the sovereign state of Lansea the noble Captain Kyle Renison is given the rank of Baron and lands equal thereto, unto perpetuity."

The Prince looked sadly at his queen, sister to the angry man whose scornful words still hung on the air like the smell of sulphur. The tears ran down her face unashamedly. One of the five bearded old men about the council table coughed, blew his nose loudly.

Sue Tenet and her cruel-eyed companion in the sea-sled watched the big gap the beam weapon called the Hammer had knocked from the massive stonework of the sea-wall.

"He's gone, damn the luck!" complained the man.

Sue wished she understood what was going on, where her sympathies should lie. She tried an indirect question: "You didn't bring me along just to watch you practice knocking holes in walls? So you missed him? So what?"

"So you'll have to kill him later, my dear. He was a friend of Haber's. Your get-up should gain his confidence long enough to . . . " the man gave her a look which explained his meaning fully. The shivers ran down her back at the sudden venom in his glance, the cruel meaning, at the strange kind of vaunting evident in his bearing.

Shuddering inwardly at the matter-of-fact voice in which he announced that she herself would presently murder the man who had escaped, she considered it was no time to expose the fact she didn't even know her role, or the name she was supposed to go by. It wasn't Clare Haber, because Clare Haber was dead. Yet, strangely, she seemed to *be* Clare Haber. It was all so confusing . . . Whatever desperate game she had gotten embroiled in, she would just have to wait till the information came out spontaneously. She could guess what this hard-faced creature would do with a useless burden. Even the waves slapping the bottom of

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the sea-sled were ominous to hear, for she realized that if the man knew her condition, it was most probable that he would just push her overboard and forget her.

The sea-sled lifted from the water, settled a few minutes later into a lagoon where dozens of the things were parked in rows along the bank. They got out, the man gesturing to an air-cab cruising by overhead.

"You'll have to attend the palace reception tonight, Sue, because Haber is already two days overdue, and we don't want to arouse suspicion. You will carry off the impersonation perfectly. There's no point in waiting. You might just as well step into Haber's place now as later. It's the only way we can make sure that there are no copies of plans for the Hammer lying around to escape our destruction. We've got to wipe out Renison and every bit of information about this weapon. Everything depends on it. We've worked too long to slip up on it now. All must go in our favor from now on."

So her name *was* Sue! Interesting, but it didn't tell her a thing. Her memory was stirred no further. The man went on talking, and she brought her attention back with an effort.

". . . closely, and I'll brief you. I drop you off at the palace entrance. You walk in as if the place belonged to you. You'll probably be taken at once to Rysto, and you will tell him that the model was approved by the Traders' Board of Inspection, that the demonstration was successful. You know what the Prince expects from the Trader's Interplanetary Bureau of Credit for the weapon. Tell him the model was seen by no one but the agent who approved the transaction, and the demonstration was seen by no one but the Board. Make sure he believes the deal was made exactly as he outlined it to Haber . . . how much easier this would have been if I could have retained my original hold on your body! That damned bath . . ."

The man paused, looking at her questioningly.

"I've got all that," murmured Sue, as if she'd heard it a dozen times before.

"Tell Rysto you are to take the complete data and plans and production details to the agent on *Sair*. He will turn in a requisition for the complete list of materials requested, which list has been gone over and approved. The agent is to

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give a receipt for their cost, marked paid . . ."

Sue looked out of the window of the air-cab at the peaceful city gliding beneath, wondering how long before the place fell before the efforts of such men as this one beside her. With divided attention she listened as his voice went on.

"The whole idea, Sue, is to get all the data they have in their hands, and leave. Bring the model away with you, say the agent asked for it. If you get a chance at the reception tonight, make an appointment with Renison. I doubt they could build another Hammer with Kyle Renison *out of the way.*" He laid emphasis on the last words. This meant a great deal to him.

Sue looked at him hating the sharp jaw, the arrogant beak like a curved sword bisecting his wide cheekbones, the thin, slightly smiling lips, the dark tongue that licked perpetually out like that of a lizard, the hard, black eyes that stared at her without a single emotion ever showing about them. She hated the wide muscular shoulders that gave the lie to the impression of ill-health conveyed by the lean, pallid face. It would be so easy to kill him when the chance presented itself, she thought again, without revulsion at the idea this time.

"The Prince will be glad to see Haber alive. Be sure not to betray your sex if he embraces you. He's demonstrative and he liked the young officer. Haber was one man he trusted above all others. He knew him well. So don't talk any more than you have to. Your voice is good, and I've made it almost a perfect imitation of Haber's, just as my present voice is—key your ear to it.

"Also, there are rumors that young Haber had several lights-of-love among the palace ladies, high-placed women, wives of dignitaries who should have known better. If somebody's wife or daughter tries to invite you into her boudoir during the evening, plead illness or fatigue. Don't be left alone with any woman longer than you can help. Their eyes are too sharp! Just keep circulating, and leave as soon as possible. I'll be on hand to pull you out of any situation that might give you away."

She could hardly listen to the low-pitched voice, so low that the cabbie behind the protective shield of the cabin could not overhear. Clare Haber was a dead man's name,

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and she was wearing his shoes! A dead man's shoes and she was supposed to know enough about him to act like him perfectly! With a chill she became aware of the blond wig against her skin. Haber's own skin! And she had killed him herself! And skinned and cured the wig and mustache herself! But no! It had been her alter-ego. A shudder of nausea ran through her, her stomach knotted in complete refusal of the monstrous plans of this man. Maybe it would be better to tell him what had happened to her mind, that she'd changed identity, didn't even know who she was supposed to be . . .

But she had pulled a little vial from his vest, similar to the one she had in her own pocket. "If you get a chance give Alfreya one of these. I'll try for Rysto. Most of them will have to die later anyway. It could save us a lot of effort to get rid of them right now . . ."

She was thinking: whatever had brought her under this man's sway in the past, she couldn't go on! In her mental condition of confusion, she was sure to betray herself, be caught wearing a dead man's scalp. Circumstances would convict her of his murder. As a spy she would automatically be convicted and executed. Her mouth opened to give an emphatic objection to the projects he seemed to accept as simple, natural deaths . . . and the grim fact of that face of his warned her, closed her mouth. Suddenly she knew something else. It had been *he* whom *she* had been! But he *thought* she was still in his mental grasp, as her body had been before the strange bath had somehow chased him out. That meant . . . She almost gave herself away as she stared at his expressionless face with new interest. The man beside her was not the man he'd been when he had been waiting for her to finish her bath! He was —whatever it was that *she* had been *before* the bath. Then who was he? Or did it matter? He—she—it . . . it was all so confusing . . . had decided to kill him already. Was he as good as dead now? There would be no electric bath to bring him back to his own body!

She couldn't tell this monster the truth now. He would simply kill her and go on with his plans anyway. Maybe, if she played her role to its end, she could somehow circumvent his plans. Her own life meant nothing anyhow, if she could

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not remember more than her name.

The air-cab settled, and her arm jerked nervously from the mounting tension within her. The man looked at her sharply. "No time to have nerves, Sue. Rysto will ask what makes you nervous. He might suspect . . ."

She shifted in her seat, leaning against him heavily. Unconsciously she found the little *shocker* snapping from its concealed pocket into her nerveless hand—it must have been habitual movement taking precedence over her conscious control, due to her confused state of mind. But now that it was in her hand, she pressed the flat nose of the little weapon to his neck, pressed the trigger.

The man stiffened with sudden, horrible jerks, an iron-hard series of muscular cramps passed over him, leaving him sitting there like a man turned to metal, quivering slightly. His agonized eyes rolled helplessly. He was as ugly a sight as she could stomach. She turned her eyes away from his face. Swiftly she went through his pockets transferring the contents to her own. She'd have to examine them at her leisure.

She leaned forward, touched the cabbie's shoulder after pressing aside the little hinged window of plastic. Not trusting her voice to sound masculine, she pointed down to the streets sliding below. He nodded; the air-cab sank swiftly down. As it lit softly on the green turf beside the walkway, her confidence came back, and gruffly she explained.

"My companion has had an epileptic attack. It's a mild recurrent attack he has once in awhile, nothing serious. But it means I will have to change my plans. Will you take him to this address—" she handed the cabbie a card she had taken from the man's pocket. She hadn't the faintest idea whose address was on it, but it would serve to get him out of the way.

She hesitated, fumbling with the green credit notes in her breeches pocket. She had no idea of the value of the notes, or what the cabbie expected. She peeled off two, handed them to the man without glancing at them. He looked startled, but she kept her eyes away from his, knowing she had overpaid him, not knowing what to do about it. Perhaps, if she seemed to have made a mistake, his cupidity . . .

The man put the bills in his

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coat pocket, saying hurriedly: "Sure, officer, I'll tend to your friend. Don't worry about a thing . . ."

She stepped from the cab and he lifted it out of sight so quickly she knew he was afraid she'd discover the mistake she'd made in the amount she'd given him. Those credits must represent a lot of buying power. Not like . . . her mind fumbled with a vague memory of another roll of bills, comparatively worthless, and of exchanging them for a tiny basket of food. But the memory faded before she could pin down the details.

She turned away, starting off with a brisk stride. Suddenly she realized her hips were swaying. How tell-tale the motion must look! She stiffened, paused, started over with a military heel and toe action, some dull memory repeating tonelessly in her mind: ". . . a little more pigeon-toed, not such short steps . . ."

A tall, uniformed figure loomed suddenly from the gathering dark. A heavy hand gripped her staggeringly by the shoulder. "You ingrate! What did you mean by taking off without a word to me? You knew bloody well it was my invention!"

Sue looked at the heavy, muscled throat, her eyes somehow refusing to rise higher. She forced them up, up to the big, ruddy and angry face, handsome as the Devil, with heavy golden eyebrows shading the deep-set green-blue eyes. It was a face with flushed and angry cheeks that she knew was usually kindly, felt it was a face she could want to see very much.

She couldn't stand the strain any more. Inadvertently she put out a shaking hand to his arm to support her quivering knees. He looked such an honest, reliable sort, even if he was angry, even if his eyes did bore into hers as if he hated the sight of her. She found herself muttering, whispering, words tumbling over each other desperately. "I've got to talk to someone, you'll have to do. I *know* you're my friend, and I'm sick, I need you. Can we go somewhere for a drink? I need a drink . . . what is this place?"

The big blond face lost its flush of anger, a sudden sympathy struggling to replace it. Concern spread over the big-boned features and a huge hand gripped her hard.

"What's happened to your voice, man? You sound like you've been through Hell!

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Don't tell me anything could happen to take the ginger out of Clare Haber? I never knew you to have any emotions but a thirst for anything to vary your fare of excitement. Sure, I'll buy you a drink, just to find out what you did with the Hammer!"

"I know what happened to the Hammer," muttered Sue. "But I don't know how it happened. I don't even know my own name, for sure. I'll tell you all about it, but get me under cover. I'm scared . . ."

The big man kept his grasp on her arm, piloted her along at a rapid pace, talking.

"I'll take you to my quarters over on the square. We can be alone there, and it's only a half-block away. No one'll notice us in this gloom. The lights aren't on yet."

Sue said no more until they had reached the sanctuary of the officer's quarters. It was a huge single dwelling. She wondered idly what he did to make use of so much space. As he let her in to the front door, the question was explained, for the whole first floor was taken up with a clutter of gadgets and machinery, mostly in a state of dis-assembly. Some of it was only half out of packing cases, others inexplicably dismembered and lying about in a jumble.

He led her through the maze without comment, seeming to think she knew all about the place, and up a flight of stairs to the second floor. Here she found a luxuriously furnished apartment, a man's place with the skins of jaguars, leopards, the gray wolf of Wancir, and animals whose skins she had never seen before, littering the floor in lieu of rugs, thrown over big chairs, tacked on the walls. It was evident, even without considering the racks of rifles and other antique arms over the wide fireplace, that this man was an inveterate hunter and collector of firearms of all kinds. She could only guess at what the insane assembly of apparatus on the lower floor meant in his pursuits, unless he was a collector of gadgets whose efforts were aimed at having one of everything the mind of man had ever produced.

The big man closed the door, put his back to it. Sue walked across the fur-littered floor, sank weakly into the depths of a huge divan covered with a great white fur of what animal she did not know. The weakness left her limbs after a long moment, during which the officer just stood there, his back against

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the door, watching her without expression. Then he paced across the room, swung about, paced back again, his big hands clenching as if some intense thought gave him pain.

"Why did you do it, Clare? I gave them the Hammer, and they, and you, sell me out without a word! The three people on Earth I love and trust, and they betray me!"

Sue looked at him blankly. Her lip quivered, her mind weary of puzzles. She felt the tears on her eyelashes and surprised in her vague mist of thought a strong desire to *be* a woman, to be *glad* she was a woman and could leave her troubles to some man to solve.

Slowly her lips moved, against a powerful fear impulse, and she managed to say: "I'm *not* Clare Haber! I don't know what you're talking about!"

With her hands still trembling a little, she fumbled a cigarette from the plastic box on the table, managed to light it. Not until then did she glance up to see what impression her announcement had made on him.

He was standing there glaring at her like a crazy man. The words came out in a torrent—angry, hurt words. "I've been through a lot today, Clare. I can't stand any jokes right now! I want to know what you've done with the Hammer, and I don't want any damned jests! I've just given Rysto my sword. I'm through with Lansea for good. But before I leave the planet, I want to know what you three are up to, and why you betrayed me. I might want to enlist with the Hornet myself! He might at least give me a square deal. That's more than Rysto gave me!"

She blew a ring of smoke from the cigarette toward him, smiled slightly at his somehow very boyish and appealing attitude. She was more herself now; the stranger's confused mental attitude steadied her. She was aware that her own thoughts were less clouded with emotion than his, what there were of them. The fact gave her confidence. That and something the word Hornet had suggested.

"I'm *not* Haber, and I can tell you that you do not want to go to the Hornet. I just quit the Hornet myself, I hope permanently."

The officer seemed goaded to greater fury by her calm. "You lie!" he snapped. "The Hornet is a fiction, a monster

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that doesn't exist. If he does, he isn't what some say he is." He bent over her, gripped her shoulder until she nearly shrieked with the pain of his steel fingers. "You sold out the Hammer to the Hornet?" he said hoarsely. "The Hornet has the Hammer?"

She was unable to answer against the fear of his fury. He shook her, snarling.

"Your silence is an admission! You rat! You sold out to the Hornet, and you dare to come to me as a friend! Haber, I'm going to kill you! With these two hands I'm going to choke the life out of you, here and now!"

Desperately she tried to wriggle from his grasp. Why did this thing keep getting out of hand? All she had to do was tell him who she was . . . but she didn't even know for sure.

The big hands closed about her throat, she felt the crushing force. Only one thing could save her—prove she wasn't Clare Haber, the man whose hair and mustache she wore. Weakly she tore at her jacket, loosened the mannish shirt, ripped off the band about her breasts. Then, with a convulsive effort she threw herself back, spread the jacket wide.

For an instant the pressure from his terrible hands increased, then the awful grasp relaxed and he stumbled back, reeling, his eyes fixed on her breasts, numbed into complete confusion by the revelation of her sex.

With nerveless hands she massaged her throat, gasping and choking. As her breath returned, she saw that he had stumbled back over a big leather hassock and was sitting on it, still staring at her bared bosom. With some impish impulse to complete his discomfiture, she stood erect, tugged off the blond wig, shook off the jacket and shirt, ripped off the mustache, then spread her arms wide and made quite sure he knew she was not Haber. She had grown to hate the thought of that name.

"Now perhaps you will let me explain myself, Mr. . . . whatever your name is." She stopped as a new realization struck her. "You must be Kyle Renison, the inventor of the Hammer!"

Kyle sat motionless, his arms lax and dangling, surprise still distorting his features. She gave a bitter laugh at his expression. "If you're through looking, I'll put my shirt back on."

He shook his head like a

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swimmer coming up from a dive. "Well, for the love of Hannah! The coxscomb is a woman! And I never knew."

Irritated at his stupidity, she rapped out: "Wake up, you silly jackass! I was never Haber. I am not Haber. I never hope to be Haber. I don't know my own name, but it's certainly *not* Clare Haber. If you will come to your senses, I'll try to tell you what I know—what little there is to tell that makes sense."

"And such a damned pretty woman too. I swear I never saw nicer . . ."

She slipped on the shirt, ignoring him for a moment. But she did not snap the tight band in place again. She slid down onto the divan, the weariness sweeping over her in waves. Stumblingly her voice began her account, and as she spoke, memory was seeping back into her being, so that even her own voice held wonderment as it went on.

"Up to this minute I didn't know who— or what— the Hornet was. My mind is numb, like a limb long unused, but I think it will get better quickly. I only know that I was dancing, somewhere, when he—it—came. I can vaguely remember a glittering mist, a strange vibration, humming electrically. It hovered over me, settled about me, entered into me. Since then I remember nothing.

"But today I suddenly found myself in a strange room, standing shivering beside a strange bath of blue liquid and an electrical web of wires. I had apparently been in the bath, been shocked by some energy that had gone wrong. I knew that I had nearly been killed. I was standing naked, as barren of memory as a new-born babe. I didn't know my name, didn't recognize my body, did not even know the use of the various things about me. Apparently my clothes were beside the bath. They fit me, they were a man's clothes, and they were obviously a disguise my body used regularly. I didn't know how the weapon in my holster worked. I knew only that I was alive, was a female, and spoke in a man's voice.

"I put on the clothes because it seemed that it was the natural thing to do. My hands went through motions evidently practiced, but totally new to my mind. Outside the door of that room a voice, identical with mine, urged me to hurry. Finally dressed, I

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went into that room and found . . . him!" She shuddered at the recollection.

"Even then I had the eerie feeling he wasn't human. Then began a confusion in my mind that hasn't cleared up yet. He said he'd been me, that I was Sue, and also Clare Haber, that Clare Haber was dead—"

Kyle tensed. "Dead!" he said. "Who killed him?"

Sue's face grew pale. She faced him, lifted her chin. "I suppose I did," she said. "In fact, I *know* I did, while *he* had possession of my body!"

He glared at her, his fists clenching and unclenching, but he made no move to get up from the hassock. "Go on," he said hoarsely. "You are being very interesting, but I warn you, unbelievable."

"How can I expect you to believe?" she murmured in horror. "When I myself cannot bring myself to believe what my memory is beginning to tell me. If I am to believe that, I have killed men, poisoning them while I charmed them with my body . . ."

She slumped down and put her face in her hands, and sobs of terror shook her shoulders as the memories flooded in. But he remained seated, impassive, still staring at her with complete unbelief written on his face.

She went on: "I have not really been alive. It seems that I have been waiting, like a soul in a grave, waiting for life to start again. And now that it has, I cannot remember who I was. I remember a name, yes. I was Sue Tenet. I believe I *am* Sue Tenet. But who was *she*. I can tell you nothing more about me.

"But I can tell you two things important to you. One, the Hornet is not a human being, but some alien creature of pure force. Two, the Hornet means to destroy human rule here, and use the people of these three worlds for his own unnamed purposes."

Her voice stopped, and they sat looking at each other with a kind of mutual animosity; she angry at his unwillingness to accept the story she had told him, as expressed by his unbelieving face; he by what he considered her clumsy effort to lie to him.

"All right," she flared at him. "Believe what you will—but the least you can do as a gentleman is get me that drink you promised me!"

He flushed, got to his feet. "I need one myself," he said briefly, going to pour it. He returned in a moment with a brimming glass with a square

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of ice tinkling in it. She sipped the liquid, her eyes watering with the sting of it. In a moment she felt the glow of the liquor in her stomach, her blood began to flow normally again, and her trembling nerves relaxed.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "Might as well embellish the story. If you're telling anything of the truth, you'll be consistent. If you talk long enough without tripping yourself up . . ."

"How can I be consistent when I can't even be sure of my name?" she snapped. "But I came here on a sea-sled, and to the street where you found me in an air-cab . . ."

"Someone shot at me from a sea-sled this afternoon!" he interrupted suddenly.

"I was on the sea-sled that shot at you," she continued, her mind fumbling blindly, wishing instantly she hadn't said it. The anger began to flush his cheeks again, and he put his glass down abruptly, and his fingers twitched. She went on hurriedly. "The man who was waiting for me to finish that strange electrical bath—he called it a *vi-eng*—"

He snorted, sardonically. "If you were taking a *vi-eng* bath, you needn't act so innocent . . ."

"Why? What does it do?"

"Do?" He stared at her, flushed again. "Never mind what it does . . . if you *don't* know, which you should, having been *in* one!"

"I told you I don't remember anything prior to finding myself standing beside it."

"Go on," he said. "Say that enough times, and I'll begin to believe it."

"The man outside seemed to think he might not have control of my mind, be able to command absolute obedience. So he seemed to be testing me. Because I was in such mental confusion, I pretended to agree with everything he said. I was desperate for any clue that would tell me what I was, where I was, and who he was, and so on. To test me, he said, we were to go on a sea-sled somewhere and kill a man named Kyle Renison, inventor of something he called the Hammer. I didn't know what the Hammer was until he *used* it. He had it right in the sea-sled."

"For a woman who wants to live, you aren't telling a very sensible story," he reminded her. "But maybe you're not so dumb at that . . ."

"You mean, if the lie is big enough . . ."

"Something like that. But

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so far, in the matter of the sea-sled and the attempt on my life, you're strictly on the side of truth. For that reason alone, I'd be willing to believe you. Another is the stories I've heard of the Hornet. You have come closest to making sense out of them."

"Telling the truth to you is dangerous," she said. "Maybe if I went on, you'd kill me anyway."

"Don't worry, I don't kill women."

She felt of her throat and murmured, "My throat will be sore for weeks."

He laughed suddenly. "Case of mistaken identity," he said.

She laughed too, then picked up the blond wig. Unable to repress a shudder, she thrust it into his hands. Her voice took on a harsh note of horror. "All right, then. That, I'm sure, is the scalp of Clare Haber. The mustache I was wearing is also his. I suspect that *I* poisoned him, that *I* scalped him, that *I* tanned the skin, and that *I* practiced for months to pass myself off for him—and when I did it, *I* was the Hornet. Now, with that horrible lie, you may want to kill me, woman or no! Oh, if it only was a *lie!*" Suddenly she broke down, and once more her shoulders shook with the horror that was in her, and dry sobs of terror shook her.

Suddenly his arms were around her shoulders protectingly, and his deep voice rumbled in dismay. "Stop it," he said. "Don't say another word. Unless you can lie! I've had enough of the truth! Enough to believe you to the hilt."

She relaxed, letting her hands sink down on the white fur. He released her awkwardly, and sat beside her, staring at her. He was so tall, beside her, that he looked down at her. "Forgive me," she said. "I'm just so scared."

"How'd you get away from the Hornet?" he asked suddenly.

She showed him the little *shocker*. "With this. I just pressed it against him in the air-cab and pressed the trigger. Then I had the cabbie take him to an address on a card I found in his pocket. I said he'd had an epileptic fit, but that it wasn't anything serious and that he'd be all right."

"Do you remember the address on the card?"

She shook her head. "I never even read it, except to note it was an address . . ."

"What was the number of the cab?"

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"I don't know that either."

He exclaimed in vexation. "Just like all women!"

She looked up at him, almost in tears again. She put her hands to her smooth-shaven head, at which he was glaring from his height. "T-tell me," she said pathetically, "is . . . is a bald woman as attractive as one with hair on her head?"

For an instant he looked down at her in surprise, then suddenly he grinned. His big square teeth were surprisingly white in his tanned face. "You *are* just an innocent child!" he exclaimed. His expression told her all doubt of her had been removed. He looked at her head critically. "If you want my personal reaction, it's a damned intriguing innovation. But I hate to think of the stubble when you let it grow again! Ugh!"

She rubbed her hand over the smooth scalp in alarm. "It hasn't begun to grow yet?" she asked. "I could have it dilated . . ."

"Why?"

"I . . . I didn't like the sound of that 'ugh'," she said lowly.

He laughed, then turned serious, his eyes on hers showing an intimate new acceptance she found very pleasant. "We don't have time for this! That fiendish friend of yours is liable to recover from his shock treatment and set out to do some of the things you were supposed to help with. By the way what were they, outside of killing me?"

She told him all the Hornet had said to her in the air-cab. He whistled. "He really means business, doesn't he! We've got to stop him!" He got up, stood before her, thinking.

"How can you stop a thing like that?" she said faintly.

He snorted. "I don't believe he is a 'thing'," he said. "I think this invisible creature is a delusion, born of the shock of the *vi-eng* unit short circuiting. I think when you learn the truth, you'll find you worked for a gang of murderers and cutthroats under threats. I could have your friend picked up, if I hadn't thrown up my commission this afternoon. I'm sorry now, but what's done is done. I can't turn back . . ."

She asked, "Why not? Changing your mind is legal, isn't it?"

He looked at her, as if plunged into deep thought by her words. A thought struck her, too, and she trembled. "Maybe you're right," she said. "But if this Hornet

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memory I have is a delusion, I'm mad! If I'm mad, I've been a tool of a gang, someway, and can't remember what has happened. If I killed young Haber . . . ." her voice dropped into a hopeless resignation to an impossible situation. "If I *am* that kind of thing, I hope I never remember what really happened!"

He stared at her.

"I'm scared!" she said. "Very frightened. I could still be shot for having Haber's clothes, for being a spy. I don't want to be given the third degree for something I can't even remember, which somebody else *may,* if it's true! How could I deny it, even if I wanted to, if *you're* right?"

His big voice became reassuring. "Don't worry. You'll not fall into Hannigan's clumsy hands if I can help it. He's our Chief of Intelligence and I've always felt distrust of him. Chiefly because of his stories of the Hornet, fantastic things, almost as fantastic as yours . . ." He stopped speaking and looked reflective, frowning slightly. He looked at her. "I don't know . . ." he began. Then abruptly he turned and switched on the visiphone against the wall. As he dialed a number, she got up suddenly, moved out of range of the pickup eye above the visiscreen.

On the screen a whirl of rainbow colors showed the screens synchronizing. From the kaleidoscopic display a woman's lovely face came suddenly. The lips moved, the machine said: "Kyle! My brother! I knew you couldn't go through with it. We love you Kyle! We were only trying to spare you unnecessary worry and strain. . . ."

Kyle interrupted. "No time for that, sis. Will you get over here right away? I've something important to show you. It will change the whole picture for us. Something damned important, Alfreya. Hurry!" He broke the connection.

Kyle picked up the blond scalp from the chair, handed it to Sue. "Prepare to receive visitors as Captain Clare Haber," he said.

She put on the wig, shuddering as the cold, dead skin of the human wig touched her scalp. Her lips twisted into an involuntary grimace of horror as she faced the mirror, patting the grisly thing into place. Then she affixed the mustache, removed her tunic, and rearranged her disarrayed blouse, careless of Kyle's intent gaze be-

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yond a slight reddening of her white neck. Swiftly she bound her full bosoms into mannish appearance with the strap and replaced the jacket.

"I hope you don't have to wear that much longer," Kyle said. "I must admit that I like you as you really are much better. Now that I've got time to notice, I'm beginning to get impressed with your looks."

"I wish I didn't have them!" she said furiously.

"Why?" He looked at her with astonishment.

"That memory of mine—that remembers only so little—*does* remind me how many men have died *because* they noticed the same things you now do!" All at once she was on the verge of tears once more.

He leaped to her side, grasped her in his arms and shook her gently. "Here, enough of that. How can Captain Haber convince a woman he is a man with tear-stained eyes?"

"Is it necessary?"

He shrugged. "Maybe not. I hope we don't have to use you as any further decoy. But how am I going to convince Alfreya of your story without first showing her something unusual?"

"Wouldn't she believe you?"

"Me, yes. But I want her to believe you!"

She looked at him bleakly. "Again, is that necessary?"

He considered her a minute. "You're sure in a black mood," he said. "Look at it this way. You've won me over, and maybe we can do something to uncover the gang back of you. If it is a gang . . . And in that event, you'll be clear, I guarantee it. And if it is that fantastic soul-stealer, the Hornet, as you believe, it may be that the entire resources of this Planet may be able to do something about it. If it wasn't for Hannigan's fantastic reports of the past . . ."

"Then you *do* believe my story, and not your theory of a gang who has used me as a hypnotized slave?"

He grimaced. "Against my common sense," he said. "Maybe *I'm* being hypnotized too—by your beauty."

She winced and he looked annoyed at his lack of tact once again.

Alfreya arrived at that moment, and as she swept in, Sue looked at her with interest. She came in without ceremony, evidencing that she was accustomed to visiting her brother. She was perhaps twenty-five, perhaps thirty, strikingly handsome in the

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same big-boned way that was her brother's.

She halted in the doorway, clasped her hands together in delight. "Clare Haber! Now, here's an errant messenger with some explanation worth hearing! Man, we've been worried sick ever since you left, thinking some leak might have given away the value of the object in your baggage!"

"Some leak did!" said Sue, in Haber's voice.

Alfreya turned to Kyle, noticed the unsmiling, grim face turned toward her. "Oh," she said, disappointment in her face. "I had the instant hope when I saw Clare that you had been wrong about being fired upon by the Hammer." Then a peculiar look came over her face and she turned back to Sue.

She moved between Sue and Kyle, peering closely at Sue's face. But Sue beat her to it, realizing it would be better if her first impression were of voluntary exposure of the deception. She reached up and pulled off the wig.

"Ah!" said Alfreya. She rubbed her eyes with one hand, then sat down suddenly. No one spoke for several moments, then Alfreya ejaculated: "A woman!"

"You're pretty good, sis," said Kyle. "I had to see a lot more than a bald head to realize that fact."

Sue's bald head turned pink, but no pinker than her face.

Kyle sat down, while Alfreya got up and walked over to Sue. She reached out and touched Sue's cheek with a fingertip, then her shoulder, noting the padding, turning her about like a woman buying a dress on a model. Then her eyes went to her brother's face, completely puzzled.

"Naturally I need a very good explanation of this fantastic deception," she said.

Kyle looked at Alfreya somberly. "This is going to be rather hard to swallow, sis. But maybe if you remember some of the crazy reports Hannigan has made to us about that mysterious entity called the Hornet, you may be able to gather some of the loose threads together . . ."

"The Hornet? A ghost! A myth! A phantom in the minds of the superstitious natives of the moons of Wancir!"

He winced. "I was afraid you'd look at it that way."

"Isn't that the way you've looked at it?" she prodded him.

"Oh," he said. "Ribbing me, eh? Well, maybe you aren't so

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hard to explain to at that." Kyle looked at Sue. "Neither of us know, exactly, sis. She had an accident while in a *vieng* conditioner . . ."

Alfreya's eyelids went up, and then dropped again as she noted no reaction from Sue. She looked a bit more puzzled.

But Kyle blushed for Sue. He hastened on, flustered. "The unit overloaded her mental circuits, blew a fuse, so to speak. She lost her memory. She doesn't even know her own name, for sure. Circumstances bear out that part of her story . . . But she has a kind of delusion of an invisible being called the Hornet possessing her, driving her from her body, using the body for many months. She's sick, scared—she needs help."

He paused a moment, then plunged into it. "What tops it is the fact that her wig was manufactured from Haber's own scalp. When our enemies begin scalping our top diplomatic men, starting with our most brilliant tactician, we're in trouble! She may be an agent of the enemy, whoever he or they may be, but she isn't a willing one. We're in deadly peril right now!"

"Will you help us hunt your friends down?" asked Alfreya of Sue.

"I'll do what I can," said Sue. "But you may not like the result if we are successful—and I don't see how we can fail to locate the Hornet. He said he would kill you all—and no doubt that now includes me."

Alfreya went to her, clasped her warmly in her arms, giving for the first time the acceptance she had mentally given almost from the first. "You come with me. I once lived here with my brother; some of my things are still here. I can get you some woman's clothes, although they will be too big. We'll find something to fit you tomorrow."

Sue brightened and Alfreya looked at her approvingly. "You're a pretty child," she said. "What is that name you remember?"

"Sue Tenet," said Sue. "I'm not even sure of that . . ." She looked confused once more.

Alfreya cocked her head on one side. "Are you a dancer?" she asked abruptly.

Sue looked her astonishment. "Why, yes! I remember dancing . . ."

"You are Mazarinda, of the Ballet! So that is how Haber fell into the clutches of the Hornet! He was in love with you, planned to marry you when he came back from his

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mission. It was his secret, and he told only me about it!"

Sue went pale, and once more she found herself wrapped in Alfreya's arms. As she began to weep, uncontrollably, Alfreya and Kyle looked helplessly at each other.

"Kyle," said Alfreya, "you'd better call Hannigan. Get him over here so we can begin the search for the Hornet. We've got to find him! And the rest of his gang!"

As she left the room with Sue, Kyle turned to the toggle switch of the visiphone and flipped it open. In seconds the visiphone screen began its warming up display of chromatics, and then Kyle dialed a number.

A burly, red-faced figure appeared on the screen and an incisive, rasping voice barked out suddenly. "Who's calling? What address?"

Kyle stepped in front of the pickup eye, looked into it grimly. "This is Renison, at home. Something bad's up, Hannigan. A group of spies headed by the Hornet has stolen the Hammer, killed Haber, and they are now making plans to destroy the plans and kill everyone who has any knowledge of the Hammer. If they get away with it, it's the end for the three planets!"

"A lot more than that!" came the rasping voice. From the visiphone came the sound of barked orders. Then the voice directed at Kyle again. "Any clues?"

"Yes. The Hornet himself was knocked out with a shocker by a woman agent of his, who broke his hypnotic control and escaped, and he's been taken to an unknown address in the city by an air-cab driver."

"Good! I'll get the driver easy enough. If only our quarry stays at the address long enough for the driver to get us there . . ." Hannigan's voice was gone, and his image with it. He had gone into the rapid-fire action characteristic of him, neglecting even to sever the visiphone connection.

Hannigan arrived at Kyle's laboratory with a very perturbed look on his face. He listened gravely to Kyle's story, then accompanied him up to his apartment. He spoke: "I have a lot of highly unreliable information about the Hornet, and it's quite fantastic. Maybe it's a red herring type of information, I don't know. But if that dame with your sister is one of the Hornet's agents, hypnotized or not, I'm going to have

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some very serious discussions with her . . ."

Kyle shook his head vigorously. "Oh, no you don't! She'll stay right with Sis till this is cleared up. She's no criminal. She's a victim herself. Moreover, she's sick. She is suffering from amnesia, and she has delusions. She thinks the Hornet is an invisible being that dived inside her, possessed her body, drove her own entity out. She didn't know her own name till Sis called her Mazarinda.

Hannigan looked startled. "Mazarinda! Working for the Hornet? He doesn't care who he picks on! So poor Haber stopped in to see his lady love before he left on his long trip —and that's as far as he got!"

Kyle looked at Hannigan curiously. "Sis thinks she's the only one who knew about Haber and Mazarinda . . ."

Hannigan grinned. "I know lots of things people don't think I know. That's why I'm head of Intelligence." The police chief rubbed his massive red nose and his little blue eyes squinted up at Renison's green ones. He gave a little cough. "Has it occurred to you, Renison, that your premier danseuse might be a lot safer with me than mingling with your highbrow friends? They might kill her, if they know she can identify some of the gang!"

Kyle held the man's eyes, his smile unchanging. "No, go, Hannigan. I know your methods. She'd be likely to die with you, from too much questioning! Besides, I'm convinced of the truth of her story, and no amount of questioning would help if that's the fact of the case."

Hannigan's eyebrows lifted. "You *believe* her story of the weird force taking over her body and expelling her own ego?"

"You've said things almost as fantastic concerning the Hornet," said Renison. "By the way, what was your source of these amazing claims?"

"My secret," said Hannigan. "What kind of an Intelligence head would I be if I didn't have sources?"

"Then let's prove how good you are, and find the Hornet before he comes out of the effects of the shocker treatment Miss Tenet gave him."

The notables of Lansea, forming the Royal Council gathered about the conference table in the private room behind the throne room of the palace. At the table head sat the Prince, his cheeks pale, his lips set in stubborn lines. Kyle, too nervous to sit, strode

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up and down the room while the Prime Minister sat beside the visiphone, waiting for a report.

"Until we hear from Hannigan, there's little we can do," said Sten Rysto. "We're up against the fact that we don't know where the Hornet bases his operations. It's well known, according to Hannigan, that there have been secret groups forming with a hornet as their emblem, on all three planets. Especially on Wancir, the water world. Now we'll have to grub them all out and destroy them. And we can do it with the Hammer, when Hannigan tells us where to strike."

"Where is the man?" asked Kyle in annoyance. "Is he out personally hunting cab drivers . . ."

"Of course not," came Hannigan's booming voice, rasping at them from the doorway. "I've just come from that address the cab driver gave me . . ."

"And . . .?" Sten Rysto rose in his chair.

"Our bird has flown the coop."

Kyle looked at Hannigan. "You're still looking for him?"

"No."

Sten Rysto bounded to his feet. "Why! Man, why?" His face was the picture of perfect surprise. Kyle Renison's brows lowered as he stared at Hannigan in consternation. Also there was puzzlement, something more to be said, and Hannigan was trying for effect.

"There must be more to say," Kyle remarked.

"Of course there is," agreed Hannigan. He had a strange aura of complacency about him, an air of self-confidence that was not like the usual demeanor of the Chief of Lansea's Intelligence Service. Usually Hannigan was a gruff, rasping, dissatisfied-with-everything personality. Something didn't ring true.

"Out with it, man!" said Rysto. "This is a serious matter, and we've no time to waste with words."

"I didn't catch my man, but I did find out where he's gone, and how to get him—this time for good!"

Sten Rysto stood for an instant more, then sank back into his chair in relief. "That is better," he said. "And where is this Hornet person?"

"On Wancir, the Water World. He's made it his base of operations, and I've got his headquarters pinpointed. We are taking off with the whole fleet immediately, with every Hammer that's been made so

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far, and blasting it out of existence!"

Kyle's eyes suddenly narrowed and he sat down too, silently and warily, watching the Intelligence Chief.

Sten Rysto sat with open mouth. "You sure of your information?"

"Positive. I'll prove it by bringing back the goods. All I need is your order to ready the fleet, and we're off."

"The order is given!" snapped Rysto, jumping back to his feet. "And the sooner we take off, the better. I'm not much to stomach battle, but I won't rest until that mysterious body and power thief is a corpse!"

Kyle opened his mouth to say something, but before the words could come out, a tremendous roar came from outside the palace and the building shook.

"What's that?" asked Sten Rysto in sudden alarm. Together with Kyle, he rushed to the window. Outside a tremendous black cloud spurted skyward, hung lazily, growing huge and black like an instantly created thundercloud. A shuddering series of heavy concussions shook the palace again, and explosions thundered in their ears. Rysto cried out: "The weapon shops! The Hornet hasn't gone, Hannigan! He's gotten the weapon shops, and the plans he wanted!"

Hannigan faced the ruler as he whirled about. "Not the Hornet, but a time bomb," he said. "I didn't expect that, I'll admit, but I'm positive the Hornet has left the planet . . ." He produced a series of photographs from his pocket. They were still damp. "These are from the observatory. Take a look at them . . ."

Kyle grabbed them from Hannigan's hand, stared at them. They showed a long, slim object, plunging through space, undeniably a spaceship —but of a strange appearance, even in the photo. The base of it was surrounded by a flickering radiance, as of radioactivity, a halo of force like nothing he'd ever seen before.

Rysto, looking over his shoulder, said: "That's like no ship I ever saw before."

"Yes, and that's my proof. It was taken early this morning, just before I pulled my raid on the Hornet's temporary hideout. If you doubt my word, call the chief astronomer . . ."

"I don't doubt it," said Rysto. "Let's get that fleet under way. We've got to get this thing before it gets us!"

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"We'll need every punch we've got," said Hannigan. "Every Hammer completed and installed. And Kyle should go along, too. He knows most about the Hammer, and how to use it effectively. I'm not sure of what we'll find on the Water World, and what we'll have to do to make the Hammer most effective there."

"Of course he'll go," said Rysto. "We'll put every bit we have into this attack. If we lose, we'll be finished . . ."

Once more Kyle opened his mouth to speak, then a peculiar look crossed his face, and he clamped his jaws tight for a moment. Then he spoke: "Of course I'll go," he said. "And don't worry that the Hammer won't do the job—if Hannigan has the Hornet's base pinned down as he says. Let's get started."

"You'll captain your own ship, the *Star Swan*," said Rysto. "Hannigan will take command of three of the remaining six ships, and I will head the other three."

"And the sooner we take off, the better," said Hannigan meaningfully.

Kyle saluted, whirled on his heel, and left the palace. But once outside, he did not head for the great naval spaceport, but instead toward the summer home of his sister, Alfreya. . . .

He found Alfreya with her arms around a weeping Sue Tenet.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"She's just remembered some more of her past while possessed by the Hornet, and the experience has shaken her."

Kyle looked pained, but he said: "I've no time now for talk about it, because something important has happened . . ."

"You mean the destruction of the weapon shops?"

"Not that, alone. But Hannigan says he knows where the Hornet is, and his base, and he's persuaded Sten to attack with the whole fleet and all available Hammers. I'm to command the *Star Swan*. We will take off within hours, I'm afraid."

"Why are you afraid?"

"Because I think Hannigan's a traitor—is working with the Hornet!"

Alfreya looked shocked. "Oh, no! Not Hannigan. He's the soul of loyalty. Rough and rasping, but not a traitor! You must be wrong."

Kyle looked grim. "The only way I can prove it is to go with the fleet and watch for treachery. If it develops,

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maybe I can do something about it."

Sue Tenet drew away from Alfreya now and rushed to Kyle, flung her arms around him. "I can remember now, Kyle! The Hornet is not a human being at all! You were wrong in telling me I had delusions from shock. He came to me as I was dancing, as a little, burning cloud of dusty blue radiance. His touch was pleasant, but somehow terribly frightening, like a pleasant, but deadly poison. He liked me, settled into me, took over my body. There was nothing I could do about it, and soon I began to slip away, further and further into the background, until I became only an observer, detached and distant, it seemed, yet still somewhere in my body, but helpless to control it even the slightest bit.

"Then I lived, a stranger in my own body. It belonged to him. My will was not even used. I began to atrophy. I remember how I used my body charms to lure men into death traps, to help the Hornet set up his base of power here on Lansea. I remember Clare Haber, how he loved me. I didn't love him, but the Hornet made my body respond to him, and the night he proposed to me . . ." Sue's voice broke, and tears came afresh.

Kyle tried to disengage her clinging arms from him, but she clung tightly. Her voice went on, becoming more hysterical now as new memories flooded in on her.

"I murdered men with poisson! And at last, I was supposed to murder you, Sten Rysto, the ruler, Alfreya . . . it all comes back to me. But then, in the *vi-eng* bath, the short circuit drove the Hornet from my body. He is a sort of fluid energy that lives in a fluid environment. In the body, it must be the blood . . . After that I was free! The energy drove his strange energy corpuscles from my body . . ."

Kyle tore her arms from about her, thrust her back into Alfreya's care. "Take care of her. Give her a sedative. I've got to go. She's given me the clue I need . . . and I've got to work on it before we go to attack the Hornet's base!"

Without further attention to the two women, one distraught and almost hysterical, the other puzzled, afraid, and vastly saddened by the terrible events transpiring about her, Kyle rushed off.

At the spaceport, the *Star Swan* became the center of the

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activity of some two hundred mechanics, busily installing apparatus strange to the warship in her weapons section. Giant generators were hooked up, supplying far more power than the Hammer armament the ship carried required. A huge tank of blue fluid was installed, and placed in it were a series of fine mesh copper screens, connected to the gleaming snouts of ordinary ray-cannon barrels, and equipped with spray-type nozzles. Then, this section of the weapons deck was sealed, and Kyle Renison himself took the keys.

An hour later, the seven ships of the Lansea space navy took off for Wancir, with Hannigan's ship in the lead and Kyle's *Star Swan* taking up the rear, not without prearrangement on Kyle's part by the simple expedient of making his first take-off attempt a false one, necessitating another too late to take anything but the rear position in the armada.

Wancir was a water world in truth. As Kyle's ship neared it, it became evident that it was a vapor-wrapped world of gigantic seas, with here and there a group of tiny islands, with mountain peaks jutting from the waves. Nothing lived on the seas or in them except monstrous salamander-like creatures as large as whales, and on the southern hemisphere, where the greatest number of islands, bleak and forbidding, rose from the sea, nothing lived but insects. It was in the northern hemisphere that the human colonies were, cut off from the south by the almost impassible seas of the Water World.

As the fleet screamed into the atmosphere of the southern hemisphere, radio contact was established between the control rooms of the seven ships. Hannigan's rasping voice cut from the receiver in Kyle's ears like a knife.

"The Hornet's nest is somewhere among these islands, in a large peak, which has been hollowed out by the action of the water millions of years ago. Inside, I have discovered, is a fleet of ships. If they are permitted to be armed with Hammers, our battle will be lost. But now, we have a chance to wipe them out."

"How are you going to find the right island?" came Sten Rysto's voice.

"All we have to do is drop a bomb near the suspected location, and there are only two or three which could possibly be the correct location, and

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his ships will swarm up to repel our attack."

"Let's get to it, then," growled Kyle.

For answer, Hannigan's ship dove down, loosed a bomb on a large island topped by a gigantic peak. Kyle watched from his vantage point at the rear of the fleet, and was perhaps the first to see the opening in the mountainside from which the nose of a spaceship peered. Then, as it came screaming up on a pillar of flame, Kyle Renison sent his own craft roaring across Wancir, away from the tiny island. Then, making a great curve, he came back in.

"What's that crazy maneuver?" asked Sten Rysto, over the radio.

"Just backing you up, in case," said Kyle cryptically.

"In case of what . . .?" began Rysto, but in that instant, he learned what. Out of the rising ship came a strange blue radiance that dissolved suddenly into a swarm of thousands of little clouds of light that moved through space exactly like a swarm of hornets. They headed for Rysto's six ships with incredible speed.

With a curse, Sten Rysto ordered his ship into action, and the brilliant and deadly bolts of the Hammer streaked down. Where they passed through the oncoming swarm of luminous hornet-lights, they caused a ripple of movement, a slight deviation in their course, but when they hit the rising Hornet ship, it exploded in a coruscating shower of fireworks that sprayed down on the mountain in a rain of fire.

Then the luminous hornet-swarm reached Sten Rysto's ship—and the other five ships an instant later. There was an instant as the hulls glowed with lumination as the Hornets passed within, then the radiance was gone. In close, perfect formation the fleet of Sten Rysto sped down toward the mountain cave and swept into it, to disappear inside.

Kyle Renison had no time for emotion, or for attack. His radar showed quite plainly the side of the mountain into which the fleet had swooped like homing swallows. His dive toward the same spot was uncalculated, almost a reflex of anger. His orders to his crew were: "Blast that cavern shut, every Hammer on that mountainside until the opening is buried!"

In the ensuing minutes, thousands of tons of rock effectively sealed the cavern opening. And then Kyle with-

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drew into space to think, and to plan what he would do next —if there was anything to do!

Back on Lansea, two stunned women stared into the television screen that revealed the disaster that had overcome Sten Rysto and his fleet. Sue Tenet was sobbing. "You see, the Hornet is not human. He is a strange form of energy from outer space. He is the advance guard of a strange form of liquid light that has life, and which breeds in the bodies of its victims. I seem to know a great deal about the Hornet and his civilization, something impressed on my memory cells by association while I was under his control. It seems to me it is this way—the Hornet is sexless, but in each victim, some little portion remains, even when the victim is dead, which grows and becomes another Hornet. But they cannot take over our mechanical world without slave bodies to occupy. You have just seen that the Hornet now has many slave bodies, and many slave ships, and worst of all, all our Hammer weapons. When they have completed control of their new hosts, the big attack will come. And once they gain control of a planet, we will all be mindless slaves, robot bodies with our souls driven into a tiny corner, helpless and trapped by the master race."

Sue Tenet turned away from the television screen, her face buried in her hands in her grief.

Alfreya switched on the space radio and called repeatedly into the void. "Kyle! My brother. Can you hear me? Kyle . . ."

Kyle, deep in thought as he hovered just beyond the atmosphere of the water world, became aware of the insistent signal from the radio, indicating that the wave band was being activated. He snapped the set on, and heard the faint voice of Alfreya. "Yes," he answered. "I am listening . . . Go ahead . . ."

"We saw . . ." said Alfreya. "Sten is gone, and Hannigan . . ."

"You mean the Hornet . . . Hannigan *was* the Hornet," said Kyle. "I suspected it when he first came back from his raid on the Hornet's hideaway. He conducted a raid, all right, but it was the Hornet who came back, in Hannigan's body. And now he's got Sten and all the crew of those six ships. Each and every man is now another Hornet, and

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sooner or later they'll come out of that mountain . . ."

"Kyle!" came his sister's voice. "You can't fight them alone! Your weapons will be useless against such a thing as that. The Hornet is an energy parasite, and not vulnerable to physical weapons such as the Hammer."

"It's our only chance," said Kyle hopelessly. "I've got one weapon," a revamped *vi-eng* unit, stepped up a thousandfold. I got the idea from what Sue told me about how the unit chased the Hornet out of her. I'm going to wait for these things to come out, then I'm going to give them a *vi-eng* bath they may not find to their liking."

"They are too many for you," said Alfreya. "But if you can hold out until help comes . . ."

"What help is there?"

"Kyle, as queen of Lansea, I know a few things you do not. One is that we are members of a Federation that spreads through the galaxy. There is a battle fleet of thousands of gigantic ships, ready for real emergencies, such as this weird energy thing from deep space. It will take several weeks for them to get here, but I am calling them in."

"They'll do no good, without such armament as the *vi-eng* bath," said Kyle in sudden hope. "Listen, Sis, can you take down some complex mathematics and relay it with your call for help? If those battle wagons can build *vi-eng* projectors as they come, they'll have a weapon to drive the Hornets out, and thus have some chance—but more, they must devise a *vi-eng net* to capture the Hornets after they are disassociated from the bodies of their slaves. Here's how it might be done . . ." Rapidly he began reeling off an array of figures until a despairing voice came from the radio.

"Kyle! I can't make sense out of that! I'm not a scientist, like you. I'm going to call the Federation and tell them what they face, and trust to their scientists to devise something."

Kyle spoke rapidly. "Maybe you're right, Sis. Just tell them of the *vi-eng* bath—they surely know what that is—and tell them how I am using it in a projector. Then tell them they'll need a net thousands of miles in diameter to imprison the Hornets. The rest will be up to them. I hope their science is as great as their Federation."

"I'll do it," said Alfreya,

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"and do your best, Kyle, to hold them until help gets here." She broke the connection.

Two weeks later Kyle's vigil over the blasted mountain came to an end. Like a volcano the mountain erupted, and the cavern was blasted open from the inside. Up from the depths came three of the ships of Sten Rysto, and they drove directly toward Kyle Renison's *Star Swan.*

Kyle shouted into the intercom and alerted his crew, then shut his lips grimly and turned his ship toward the coming battle, in his heart a silent prayer.

As he had hoped, the adapted *vi-eng* unit was a surprise to the Hornet, and as the four ships closed, he went into action, firing all his Hammers in unison with the *vi-eng* projector. One of the Hammers jolted its deadly bolt into the belly of the first attacker, and the ship exploded. But as it tumbled down, blue radiances began to escape from it. However, they seemed tiny, and they fled back down into the mountain.

"Young ones!" muttered Kyle.

Now a bolt from Kyle's ship struck another of the enemy, and it staggered, veered away crazily. Then a flash came from the third ship, leaning toward the *Star Swan* like the lightning of doom. It struck the ship on the nose, blew it off. In his control room, Kyle found his ship unanswerable to his commands, the controls ripped away. But he fired his *vi-eng* projector and saw the third enemy ship bathed in the violet glow of the *vi*-energies. Then as he drifted helplessly, he saw dozens of tiny blue radiances drift through the hull to speed through space toward the *Star Swan.*

In a matter of minutes they would reach the ship, and the *Star Swan*'s crew would follow Sten Rysto into the mountain, slaves of the Hornet. Desperately Kyle raced to the weapons room, obsessed with an idea that had come to him almost too late. On his way he yelled for the crew, and they came with him, eager to devise something to protect them from the onrushing Hornet menace.

Kyle roared at a big hairy-armed lieutenant: "Our only hope—short that *vi-eng* unit into the hull! Then turn it on. We'll all get an experience we won't forget, but it may save our lives. Those three ships are out of commission . . ."

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Together they wrestled with the projector, wrenched it from its mounting, turned it on the hull. Then Kyle turned on its energies. Instantly the hull was bathed in the violet light, and instantly he and his crew felt the exhilarating effects of it.

"So this is a *vi-eng* bath!" he exclaimed. "No wonder they are taboo among polite society!"

In spite of the ecstacies pouring along his nerves, Kyle raced to the port and looked out. Surrounding the ship were the blue radiances of the Hornet swarm, but they were baffled. Those that approached the ship too closely, shuddered, and reeled back. And some that touched, recoiled as though maddened and streaked back toward their mountain cavern, far below.

But then, from the third ship, drifting silently in the distance, came a darting lifeboat, and as it neared, Kyle saw seated in it the familiar form of Hannigan, the Intelligence Chief.

"Here comes trouble," said Kyle to the hairy lieutenant. "And we can't shoot back. Our main controls are gone, and that includes the Hammers."

"He can knock out our generator," said the lieutenant. "It's unworkable without the outside pickup . . ."

"Get your space helmet," said Kyle. "And get one for me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go outside and get him!"

The lieutenant secured helmets from the locker and the two donned them. Then, proceeding to the bomb-bay locks, Kyle opened the inner lock and stepped inside, followed by the lieutenant. They closed the lock behind them.

"Now," said Kyle, shouting loudly to carry his voice through the helmet, "we'll open the outer locks, and I'll go outside. You hold onto my hand, until I get free of the lock, then I'll try to get him with my hand ray before he gets that pickup with his lifeship."

The lieutenant looked grim. "Good luck, sir. I'll hang on tight."

Kyle operated the lock mechanism and it opened. Then he dropped through, grasping his lieutenant's hairy arm with a wrist-grip. Outside he saw the tiny lifecraft rushing toward him, Hannigan's face visible in the plastic cowl, twisted in a strange grimace.

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Kyle aimed carefully, fired his weapon. An exultant exclamation came from his lips as the ray found its mark. Hannigan's body slumped down, and the lifecraft veered away and shot toward the planet below. But out of the ship came an angry blue radiance that arrowed up toward Kyle.

"Pull me in, quick!" yelled Kyle, but before the lieutenant could obey, the blue Hornet-radiance arrowed up past him, into the hairy arm projecting from the bomb-bay port. Kyle felt a strange tremor in the hand that clasped his, then felt himself drawn in. Looking up into the lieutenant's eyes, he saw a strange blue radiance flickering in their depths, and on the man's face a sardonic grin. Kyle whipped up his gun and fired, drilling a neat hole directly between those eyes.

But before he could reach the metal of the ship, to make contact, in a desperate attempt to open the inner port before the Hornet could make another transference, a blue flare leaped out at him, grew larger, engulfed him—and he sank down, down, into a lethargic nothingness where existence seemed a small, futile thing.

Blackness encompassed him.

Kyle Renison moved in a gray haze of obedience, explaining and teaching the glittering entities of the construction and operation of his deadly Hammer device. Flitting all through the cavern was a golden swarm of the Hornets, little ones, larger ones, full sized ones and the giant ovoid of the Honored First. Here and there stood *the men,* waiting motionless for their occupants to return; or busily writing, drawing, constructing as they taught their young occupants everything they knew.

Kyle Renison tried very hard to extract from his own inhabitant some understanding to print upon his own slack, helpless mind a complete picture of the inherited memory pattern which was the individual Hornet's structure of instinct. He succeeded in part, and the shock of fully understanding the tremendous mental resources of these immature, weeks old creatures was the dead, venomous taste of utter defeat. Man would never be free from things like this. Man as a race was doomed!

Subconsciously, in his association with the entity of the Hornet, Kyle was aware of its memories, and understood

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where it had come from, and why.

The Hornet had lost the Swarm, somewhere between Coma Berenice and Denebola. He had been very sick for a long time, his mind refusing to function in the absence of contact with the swarm mind. For one who had never functioned as an individual, but only as a unit of the greater Swarm mind, being lost in space was no joke. He needed life, other life, as a baby needs a mother, as a man needs food.

The nearest habitable planet was one of three little worlds circling a small sun for which he had no name. He came down out of space like a whirling ball of thistledown, glittering with the suspense of discovery, and was hurt when no one even noticed him. Apparently the tenuousness of his body was such that their eyes refused to see him!

For days he had hovered about, vastly intrigued by the simple-minded solid creatures of flesh and blood. He was both disappointed and elated to find these strange creatures absolutely without conscious race memories. Elated because their abysmal ignorance left them helpless prey to his need for hosts to supply his life-hungry body, disappointed because their minds were empty of knowledge of their own race's past. There rose in him a terrific ambition, a great pride, a constantly mounting tension arising from the vision of conquest of this new world and of growth of his own seed into a new World Swarm.

The possibility of himself fathering a new type of Swarm from these simple two-legged units aroused within his ego-center desires such as no other of the supporting units of the *Hornito* had ever been allowed to entertain. To toy with these creatures, master of their destinies, to create from them such an organization as would astonish the others of their race for endless generations to come . . .

The Hornet had set about his new plans with all the skill of his tremendous and ancient inheritance. He had been attracted to one entity especially, a dancer named Mazarinda, on the stage bills, who danced a dance called the "Firefly." Perhaps it was the dance that intrigued him. But as the dance came to a climax on one performance, the Hornet quite suddenly sank into the dancer's body, and she had faltered, stumbled, then suddenly gone on in move-

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ments incomprehensible even to herself. She had found herself dancing with superhuman ability and imagination, and she had become the darling of Kingsend.

The Hornet, intrigued with the weird differences of this unusual host, experimented with the control of her singularly graceful limbs, and above all with the complete novelty of being a woman. For the Hornet, though born with the rudimentary organs of sex, had been a sexless creature. The functions of childbearing and of fecundation had been pre-empted by the Swarm Queen and her chosen consorts. Now he had acquired, at one full swoop, both sex and a will of his own. In this new power the full plan of conquest had been born in the mind of the lost Hornet.

And now Kyle Renison, Sten Rysto and the warriors of the battle fleet of Lansea worked mindlessly to further the ghastly conquest of the Hornito.

But, as they worked, the fleet of the Federation reached Lansea. . . .

Kyle Renison's mind was completely submerged as the gleaming ships flashed into sight above the cloud layer of the Water World, like arrows of deadly fire from nowhere into instant, terrific power. They moved in swift, complex maneuvers, in complete radio silence, trailing strange, shimmering nets of gossamer metal, weaving back and forth above the mountain beneath which the Hornet and his new *hornito* busied themselves, readying themselves for the general emergence which their plans entailed, readying for complete Empire over all Wancir under the First One, and then over Lansea and Sair.

The strange shimmering nets spread and joined magnetically above the mountain, became a vast sheet of crackling fire as cables joined the net to the atomic generators of the mighty Terran Federation warships. The electrified web of *vi-eng* force settled gradually down over the mountain of the Hornito, glowing and crackling with a seeming sentience and writhing animation of its own.

Riding one of these huge steel-clad arrows of fire was Sue Tenet, thrilled to the core with the snap and precision of the blue-clad figures hastening interminably about the complex corridors, thrilled with the handsome, alert young faces on every side, thrilled with the military pow-

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er expressed in every glance and low-muttered command from the officer at her side. For she was on the bridge, not by permission, but by command, and her suggestions as to the nature of the weird creature that had invaded her body and mind, her explanation of the accident that had driven him out, had been the base upon which the web had been built and the nature of the force pouring through it deduced.

When they were ready, a ray similar in nature to that constructed by Renison from the *vi-eng* unit lanced down toward the chaotic jumble of boulders marking the shattered opening into the mountainside. Back and forth the lance of humming power played, and from within the cavern came an answering buzz of irritation, of questioning—and out from the mountainside poured an angry swarm of radiant and glittering vitality.

Inside the cavern Renison's crew stood beside those of the ships of Sten Rysto, empty of memory, empty of their inhabitants, waiting for life to begin again. Stupidly they looked about, wondering . . .

Out from the blasted side of the mountain streamed the golden cloud of young Hornito, up—up, a storm of humming anger, of vindictive intent, determined to stop the pain of the *vi-eng* ray that the lowly four-limbed race had dared to bring against them.

Up, into the dimly glowing mesh of electrified metal fibers, and the whole net leaped and tugged and jerked as they strove to pass through and reach the men in the ships beyond. Back and forth beneath them passed the diving fighting craft, each towing a cable made fast to one rim of the great net. Like a purse seine, the edges circled, came down in long curves, tugged together—became a great sphere completely enclosing the maddened creatures of energy from the depths of space.

Their terrific speed, their frightened strength, their immense store of inherited memory—nothing could serve them now. Down into the sphere of metal mesh lanced the huge *vi-eng* ray, slashing at the darting, desperate mass of golden energy. Slower, slower, weaker, became the gyrations of the great sphere, of the net. The walls of metal mesh lumped out here and there as they dashed against it in maddened attempts to escape the ray. Tighter and tighter the net closed about

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them, smaller grew the space in which they might dart to elude the ray. Dimmer grew the golden glitterings inside.

The fish had been taken.

Puzzled, Sue watched on the great screens of the battleship's bridge, watching one big craft take aboard a cable bigger than the little cables that had been used to draw the trap together. She clapped her hands. "Now the Hornet knows what it feels like to be a captive. If I could only hear what he is thinking!"

What puzzled her was the evacuation of the big cruiser, which was emptying men into a dozen waiting lifeboats as it gathered way slowly outward into space, the great, glowing net of steel towing behind awkwardly.

"What are they doing?" asked Sue.

The officer beside her turned, wiping his brow with a limp, wet handkerchief. "We don't know enough about that kind of being to open that net in this galaxy, Miss Tenet. That ship is under automatic control, empty of humans. That net is going to be towed until the ship runs out of fuel, straight out if all human ken, I hope. It should coast on until the end of time, barring collisions. I for one want to hear no more of any of your Hornets, young lady. If that maneuver had failed, if our timing had been off, if they had not been inside that cavern . . . It could well have meant the end of mankind. I doubt if we'd have got a second chance at them."

Sue raised on tiptoe, kissed the officer on the cheek. "But you did succeed, and I think the Terran Federation space navy is the greatest thing I've seen. I'll never forget this experience."

The officer smiled a little wearily. "I'll never forget it either, I can tell you! We were just lucky. Lucky that you and your missing Captain Renison were able to give us a clue to the only possible attack against these things. That particular beastie is unknown to Terran science, and it is still unknown. We may not be through with them, and it won't pay to forget what we've learned here."

Back in Kingsend, Kyle Renison was rather astonished to find himself installed in the palace proper, particularly as he did not even remember the place. He was even more astonished when his sister swept in, her eyes glowing, to kiss him heartily.

"I don't even know you, lady . . ." he began.

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"You will, dear. You're the newly appointed governor of the Terran province of Lansea. When you get your wits back, you're going to be a very angry man. But, heavens knows I didn't want the job, and you couldn't help yourself, so I suggested your name. Sten was dead, along with a few of the others, when we found you. Later on, there'll be an election, and I could guess without an effort who they'll elect. You. And I'm free to do what I please again. No more government functions, no more playing great lady of the land, I can relax and enjoy life again . . ."

"I don't know what you're talking about," muttered Kyle. "And though you talk gaily, you seem sad. Is it because you have put one over on me, or is it because you knew this Sten you are talking about, who is dead?"

"You will remember, soon," she said gently.

Sue, coming in from a series of rather strenuous farewells to several departing officers of the Terran Federation fleet, slid down on the seat beside Kyle and took his hands between her own. Her voice was a mixture of impishness and glowing gratitude. "Now that you're in no condition to know what it's all about, I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. Renison."

Kyle smiled a little foggily. "If I know any answers, dear girl, I'm sure I'll give them to you."

"Will you marry me?" asked Sue.

Kyle looked at Alfreya, his brow knit with puzzlement.

Alfreya moved toward the door. *"Say yes,* you fool! You may never get a chance again. I guarantee you won't regret it!"

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EAST IS EAST

By RICHARD DE MILLE

Always it comes to this—even across space: Are we one people, all children of the same Creator, or are we—different? Here is part of the answer, in one of the most magnificently written fantasies of our time.

MOTHER looked up from her blue melon and said casually, "Rella is coming home."

Grandmother gaped at her, in astonishment.

The phoenixes, sensitive to the new emotional balance, beat the air and disappeared into the foliage above.

Mother pushed at her table, and it glided slowly to the house. "The message came in the night. I found it on the machine when I woke." She rose, with the flowing movement of one who has never known illness, and moved about under the tree, searching for the phoenixes.

"Well, what's *wrong?* What did the message *say?*"

"It didn't say much. Just, 'Mother dear, returning fifteenth April. Am well. Rella.'"

She put her hand up, in invitation, and cooed to the birds. They did not appear.

"Do you think *he'll* come with her?" Grandmother sent her table back to the house with a nervous jab.

Mother pressed the moss which grew along the wall. It was dry under her hand. With sandalled foot she worked a lever, and a curtain of fine spray began to drift all about the wall. She let it touch her face, refreshing her. She turned to grandmother, who was standing anxiously by the fountain.

"I think Rella would have told us, if he were coming," she said. "It wouldn't be like her not to."

Grandmother humphed. "I said it wouldn't work out. Running off like that, against

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anything anybody could say. Just pick up and go!"

They walked slowly toward the house. Mother picked dead blossoms and threw them on the spaded beds. "We don't know yet that it hasn't worked out." Her voice was not hopeful.

"Why would she be coming home then?"

"Why, just to see the family! It could be just to see the family."

"A fine time! After six years."

Mother sighed. "It's hard to get priority for the trip. She wrote us that. Even if Ting is an official of their government, he can't be sending Rella home to see us every year. You can't expect that."

Grandmother surveyed the garden sourly. "There they are!" she said.

Mother followed her gaze and saw the phoenixes playing in the spray along the wall, their yellow crests flattened by the moisture. Suddenly, the automatic shower ceased, and the birds looked about them, making angry noises, mother had to smile. The phoenixes were a gift from Rella. She had sent them, at great cost, during the second year of her marriage.

"Well, we'll see, when she gets here," said grandmother, and she went into the house.

Mother sat down on a narrow stone bench, by the door. Apprehension swirled through her, as she thought about her eldest daughter, caught in an exotic love, swept away to another planet, wed to a being of another race. Was she coming home in triumph, or in sadness? Mother closed her eyes and tried to see the future.

Within the house, father's voice was heard, booming. Then the piping shout of little Jory. Soon the two of them burst through the door. Father took mother in his arms and kissed her face, lifting her off the ground, while Jory danced around them.

"I thought you were going to sleep late," said mother.

"Jory had other ideas."

"Daddy's going to take me on the bottom of the sea!"

"Oh, Martin! Today?"

Father turned to Jory and said seriously, "Jory, would you just as soon go to the bottom of the sea tomorrow?"

"No, no! Today!" Jory swung on his father's sash and stepped on his father's feet. "You promised. Today! Today!"

Father turned to mother. "It looks like today, darling.

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Besides, tomorrow it will be too crowded." He smiled at mother and smoothed her black hair.

"But you haven't had any breakfast."

"I'll get some on the way."

"In the car," said Jory.

Mother shook her head, smiling. "All right." She closed one of the magnetic buttons on Jory's shirt. "But only in the regular one, Martin. Not in the deep one."

Father reassured her. Jory tugged him through the door, into the house. In a few moments, mother saw the car leave the roof and glide silently up into the bright sky.

"Did you tell Martin about the message?" Grandmother was standing in the doorway.

"No. I'll tell him tonight, after the children have gone to bed." She peered after the car, but it was already lost to view. "If Rella *is* coming home to stay, it might be easier if I sent Carla and Jory to Esther's for a few days."

"What about Lyss?"

"Lyss will be right here!" said a voice.

The older women turned in surprise. Lying on top of the garden wall, was Lyss, her bare young body open to the caress of the sun, like any flower.

"Imagine!" said grandmother, indignant. "How long have you been up there?"

"Did you hear what we were saying, Lyss?" said mother.

Lyss sat up. Mother saw with pride how lovely she had grown. The bright sun made relief of her figure and glistened on her damp skin. She was very attractive.

"Is something wrong with Rella's marriage?" Lyss said, anxiously.

"We don't know," said mother, "but we think there may be. If she has left Ting, she will need all the love we can give her."

Lyss came down from the wall. "What did Rella say?"

"Just that she is coming home."

Lyss considered. Then she smiled. "I don't think anything is wrong."

Grandmother humphed.

Lyss's eyes were bright. "I'll bet she's finally decided to have a baby, and she just wants to see us all once more before she gets busy with a family."

Mother put a grateful arm around Lyss and kissed her cheek. "I hope you're right," she said.

Lyss hugged her mother. "Won't it be wonderful to see her, after so long! Gosh!"

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Lyss looked worried. "How soon will she be here?"

"In three or four days, I think, dear. Why?"

"Oh." Lyss blushed. "I just wondered. I'm so impatient to see her!"

"So are we all." Mother stroked an errant strand of black hair from Lyss's face."

"Mother, will you fix my hair?"

"Kwan again?"

"Yes. He's coming this morning to take me through his ship, at last. He had to get permission. I want to look perfect."

"Just be careful he doesn't take you off with him!" Grandmother started into the house.

Lyss laughed. "She thinks the Khovvi want to steal all the Earth women away. She doesn't know how many forms have to be filled out first!"

Mother's eyes widened, but she said nothing.

Lyss sat, like a mermaid princess, before the great mirror in mother's dressing room. Mother's expert fingers turned her heavy hair. Lyss's eyes were closed. She did not see the lines in mother's face.

"What ever happened to young Bodil. Did he go into the navy?" Mother sprayed lacquer on a shining roll.

"Evlyn says he's training on one of the new ships that will be able to reach Kharr."

"Evlyn says?"

"They're together now. Just think, Mother! When the new ships go to Kharr, some of our men will bring back Khovv women — Khovanni — just as Rella was taken to Kharr. Won't that be wonderful! I can hardly wait to see the Khovanni. Kwan has told me about his sisters, but, naturally, he doesn't tell the right things. Men never do. He has a sister eighteen and one fifteen. The one who is eighteen is already married. Her name is Kwali."

"Does Kwan know Ting?"

"No, but he's heard of him. They live in the same city. That means, if . . ." Lyss sucked in her breath. "That means Kwan could go to see Rella sometime," she finished lamely. "Of course, now they can meet here."

Mother worked in silence for a moment. Then she said, "You never see John or Pauli any more. They used to be around so much."

"John is going to marry Cymo."

"That girl with the red hair?"

"Yes."

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"He wanted to marry you, I thought."

"Yes, he wanted to." Lyss shrugged her brown shoulders.

"Pauli called you last week, too. I almost asked him to come over and visit the family, but I didn't know how you'd feel about it. *I* think he's very nice."

"Yes, he's nice."

"If he calls again, what shall I tell him?"

Lyss sighed. "I can't go out with every man in Hoyl, Mother. There just isn't time!"

"Couldn't we say," mother ventured, "that there just isn't time to go out with any *man* in Hoyl?"

Lyss blushed. "Only Kwan," she said.

Mother kept her voice as casual as she could. "Is Kwan going to ask you to marry him, Lyss?"

Lyss flashed her mother a glance in the mirror, and then looked down. "I think so."

Mother stopped working. "What are you going to say, if he does?"

Lyss's voice was unsteady. "I'm going to say yes." She took a deep breath.

Mother sat down beside her, her back to the mirror, her hands in her lap. "He's leaving soon."

"Yes. Twelve days."

"Would you go with him?"

"Yes."

"Just like Rella." Mother's voice was strange.

"Are you very much against it, Mother?"

"I'm not against anything in the world, or out of it, that will make you happy, Lyss."

"Kwan will make me happy!"

"I'm sure he's a fine person."

"Well, then?"

"It isn't *Kwan,* Lyss. I have nothing against Kwan. But . . ."

"But what?" The two women had turned to face each other. Lyss's face was dark with trouble. Her mother's pale.

"I don't want to hurt you, Lyss. But you must know how I feel. How your father feels. We didn't want Rella to go and we don't want you to go. Now Rella's coming back. It seems such an awful risk. What do we really know about the Khovvi? Almost nothing. Probably they feel love and loyalty and all the things that a woman needs—just as we do—but . . ."

Lyss gasped. Tears filled her eyes.

"Lyss, I know Kwan is fascinating to you, and romantic.

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But there are so many nice young . . . *men,* that you could choose from . . ."

"Kwan's a man!"

"Lyss, it's all very well to call him a man, but what does it mean? He comes from so far away that one can hardly imagine it. His evolution was totally separate from ours—I don't say it was different, but it was separate, at least."

"Oh, Mother!" Lyss clenched her fist and stared at nothing. She snatched up the heavy comb which her mother had been using and twisted it until the teeth bit into her hands. Tears ran down her cheeks. "It's no good saying any of that! I love him, and I can't love anybody else. I've tried!"

"I said too much, then."

Lyss turned and hid her face against her mother's breast, pressing new tears into the folds of soft cloth. "It's all right. You only said what you felt." She began to sob. "I was so . . . sure, until you said . . . Rella was coming back! I was so confident!" She crept against mother. "But now I'm scared!"

The two women sat together until Lyss felt better.

"Let me finish your hair now, darling." Mother rose and dressed Lyss's hair. They smiled shyly at each other in the mirror, and Lyss kissed mother's hand, catching it as it formed the last smooth coil.

Mother gave Lyss one of her own dresses to wear.

"You didn't *try!* You *couldn't* have!" Lyss looked wildly at Rella.

The eldest daughter sat on Lyss's bed, in Lyss's room. She wore her hair as an unmarried woman wears it. Her dress was bright, and it showed her body. Her ornamented shoes reflected the morning sunlight, making green and blue spots on the white ceiling.

"You just didn't love him!" Lyss was not herself. She stood stiffly, hands twisting one of the heavy curtains which hung between the bed and the garden.

Beyond Lyss, Rella saw water falling into a small pool, where she had played as a child. Some birds were splashing on the surface of the pool. She looked compassionately at her anguished younger sister. "You think it is too soon for me to wear my hair like a girl, but you forget how long the trip is from Kharr to Earth. I have had months to think about my life. I did love Ting, and I still love him. But I am young, Lyss. There are other places

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in my heart, and there will be someone to fill them—someone of our own race. It will not help Ting if I wear mourning. It will only remind me of him." Rella sighed deeply.

"I shouldn't have said that, Rella."

"It's all right. I know why you said it. I would have said it, too, eight years ago. I would have said that any woman who could not get pregnant simply did not love her husband, and that it didn't make any difference whether he was a human or a Khovv. But now, after four years of wanting to conceive, and failing, I have to admit that love is not enough."

"But why, Rella? Why?" Lyss's fingers twined together painfully. "Conception is a voluntary act for any normal woman. You love a man. You both desire a child. You select a day. You conceive. I could conceive for Kwan even today, if I wanted to. I feel that way about him already, and so does he about me."

"Yes, Lyss. That would be true with one of our own race. But the Khovvi are another race. We have proved that now."

Lyss paced the room. "What about the white race and the Negro race and the yellow race. *They* all mixed and made *us!* Conception wasn't even voluntary in that period, according to the capsule records, but they didn't have any trouble!"

Rella shook her head sadly. "Those 'races' were just divisions of the *human* race, Lyss. They all had the same evolution. The Khovvi are a *different* race."

Lyss began to cry. "They're intelligent, rational beings. They think the way we do and love the way we do. *Why* aren't they human? What does it mean to be human. It surely doesn't mean that you come from *this* planet of *this* sun rather than from *that* planet of *that* sun. It ought to mean that you're just a *person* . . . like us . . . like Kwan . . ." She threw herself on the bed and sobbed.

Rella watched her quietly. In a few minutes, Lyss's breathing became regular, and she sat up on the bed. Rella brought a damp cloth and wiped her face.

Lyss looked at Rella. "You used to do that for me when I was little."

"Yes." The sisters felt the love that was between them, that had always been between them.

"I missed you when you went away, Rella."

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"I missed you, too."

"Kwan is coming for me this afternoon. In three days he is leaving, Rella."

"I know."

"I'm sure he doesn't know anything about this. He couldn't know and feel the way he does about me."

"Probably he doesn't. Ting refused to believe it for months after I told him. So did the husbands of other human women. The Khovvi are persistent when they believe in something—more than we are. They have many qualities that are better than human, I think."

Lyss looked at her sister. "Rella, did all the others feel the same as you?"

"What do you mean, honey?"

"Did all the other women, the human women, did they feel that the Khovvi were not human?" Hidden eagerness began to show in Lyss's face.

Rella was puzzled by the question. "Well . . . yes . . . naturally they did. The Khovvi *are* a different race, so they're *not* human. Naturally!"

"All of you felt like strangers?"

"Lyss, the culture is so different. The very stars in the sky are different . . ."

"And not even *one* of those women believed that we and the Khovvi are the *same?*" Lyss's eyes shone. "All of them were thinking about the *differences?*"

"Oh, at first everyone talked about how the two races were about to become one race. That was all they *did* talk about, it seemed sometimes. We Earth women used to sit arounding picking out Khovv men for our female relatives back home, and vice versa. It was our favorite pastime. But then," Rella's face grew sad, "when no one had a baby, we stopped talking about it. It began to be obvious that the two races were *not* going to be one race, after all."

"I see." Lyss was in a torment of hope and fear. "Rella, don't you think . . ." She stopped, unable to judge her sister, unable to accuse her, even by implication.

"What, honey?"

"Don't you think you might ever go back to Ting?"

Rella smiled sadly. "No, Lyss. A woman should be a woman. A woman should have children. I want them. Ting wanted them. Neither of us would be happy without them. It is better this way."

Lyss looked out into the garden and tried to calm her-

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self. "Rella, if one Earth woman went to Kharr and *did* have a Khovv baby, would you go back to Ting?"

"It couldn't happen, Lyss! If you want to go with Kwan, all right! You know what you're doing. But a baby you will never have, my darling. It's just impossible."

Lyss turned, triumphant and confident. "Give me a year!" she said.

Rella shook her head. "Honey, honey! It's so easy to break your heart that way!"

Lyss went to her mirror and began to dress. "It's my heart," she said. New thoughts were bursting upon her like fireworks. Taking particular care with her eyes, she drew lines out from them to make them look like Kwan's. Around the lids she painted a thin rim of gold.

"My sisters would love you. You would be happy with us. We would teach you to sing our songs and dance our dances and read our books. On nights when both the big sun and the little sun are set, a silver light comes from our three moons. We walk through the city gardens or ride in the mountains. In the season of no darkness, we swim in the underground lakes. The water is warm and soft. Your house would not be big, but it would be your own. It would be what I have dreamed of."

Kwan held Lyss close and spoke into her ear. They leaned together against a tree trunk. Lyss looked down two hundred feet into the waters of the Pacific Ocean, which dimly foamed and whispered on smooth rocks. The buttons on Kwan's shoulders reflected starlight. His voice surrounded her. She was afraid to answer him.

"Let's walk some more," she said. They took the path along the top of the cliff. Kwan looked down at Lyss and saw by the occasional glowing lights they passed that she was frowning, deep in thought.

"What is troubling you, Lyss?"

"I have to ask you something, Kwan. Something which is hard to ask and hard to answer."

"My feelings are not easily hurt." He stopped and drew her to him.

"I didn't mean that. I mean the idea is difficult."

"Oh!" Kwan laughed. His laugh had a more rolling sound than that of Earthmen. "Well, let me see whether I can answer it."

"All right. This is it. What

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is the difference between my people and yours?"

Kwan clasped his hands and stood thinking. Lyss held her breath. Finally, he said, "There are many differences, but the most important is that my people are on Kharr and yours are here. If you come to Kharr with me, then your people will be on Kharr, and there will be no difference."

Lyss smiled and pressed his hand. "Oh, Kwan! That's so sweet! But that isn't what I meant. I meant differences in the way the people of this planet are and the way the Khovvi are." She watched his face anxiously.

He seemed puzzled. "Well," he said, "your eyes are brown and mine are yellow . . ."

"Gold."

"All right, gold." Kwan laughed. "I was afraid this question had something to do with our getting married, but if it is only a game . . ."

"It isn't only a game, Kwan. Answer another question."

"As many as you like." He pulled a leaf from an aromatic plant, crushed it, and inhaled the perfume.

"What would prevent two people like us from having a child?"

"Prevent us?"

"Yes."

"Nothing." Kwan's eyes narrowed. "You said you wanted children, Lyss."

"I do!"

"So do I!" He spoke as if the matter were settled. They walked again and she, too, picked a leaf and crushed it. "Are you going to answer *my* question tonight?" Kwan said.

"Yes, I am."

He held her closer. In a few minutes they came to their car. Kwan set the air seal and took them up swiftly into the night sky. At five thousand feet he set the car for drifting. It hummed softly. In the distance, over the water, they could see the lights of another car, also drifting. Thirty miles inland, the lights of Hoyl glowed against low clouds. Everywhere on the land below, small communities shone on the dark surface of Earth. In the sky, the stars seemed like other dwellings, more numerous but almost as close.

"Is space like this?"

"A little. You will see."

"The stars must be so beautiful, when you are in space!" She nestled against him.

"When I look out at them, I think more about the people than about the stars themselves."

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"The people?"

"Yes. Here, floating so close to a planet, we are near a few billions of people. But out there," he gestured a sweep across the sky, "we would somehow be near the whole population of the universe—all the people there are, Lyss." She nodded, understanding. "Someday," he said, "we will reach them and know them face to face. Someday we shall all be reunited."

"Reunited?" Lyss looked up into his face.

"Yes." He frowned. "Isn't that the right word for bringing together what has been separated?"

"That is the word, Kwan."

He smiled down at her. "I am supposed to be proficient in your language."

"You are." She turned, putting her arms around his neck. "But do you know that there are people on Earth who would not understand when you say reunited?"

"Why?" He frowned again.

"They think they are different. They don't think anything has been separated, and so they don't think it can be brought together. They think that Earth people and Khovvi must always be two races."

Kwan listened quietly.

"Those people would even say that an Earth woman could not bear a child for a Khovv man."

Kwan laughed. "The universe is well stocked with absurd ideas." He looked closely at her. "Lyss, you are troubled about this. It is because of your sister." She nodded. "She has told you that it is impossible."

"Yes."

"Do you know that space travel was impossible, too, until a certain thing happened?"

Lyss's eyes widened. "What was that?"

Kwan's eyes laughed. "Someone traveled in space."

Suddenly, without planning it, she was kissing him passionately, trembling with desire, and crying at the same time.

Father showed hardly any distress as he welcomed Kwan into the family. Mother packed a few of Lyss's best clothes and most valued possessions. Carla and Jory ran around like wild animals at first; then they cried in Lyss's arms. Kwan wrote his communication number for mother. Grandmother said privately that it was just too bad.

After they had gone, Rella sat alone in the garden until evening. **THE END**

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She stood behind the light, flanks glistening, quivering with rage and hate. She was transformed. Could this be

THE LITTLE ONE?

By BARBARA J. GRIFFITH

THE hunter had come to the cabin in the summer night, through the silvered forest, his boots swift and careless in the brush. On the old, dry boards of the porch he had flung the door open, sighting quickly, and the bullet had met the old man half out of his chair.

The shot was a dull blast of sound in the other room of the cabin. The girl crouched for an instant against the far wall; then, with the raw panic of a hunted doe, she was over the window sill into the blackness behind the cabin. The roar of the rifle still echoed at the forest edge as she fled across the yard, and before the hunter had left the porch she was gone.

Now she burrowed into the shallow safety of the culvert, sharp rocks pressing her sides, and waited. She knew he would find her, very soon, because he was a woodsman and knew the smell of hunted things, and how they cowered as she did now in the first small crevice of shadow that caught their eyes in flight. Their fear was a smell and a breath sound that this man knew. He would come into the trees, sharp for signs of her even in the darkness, because he knew the woods as a blind man knows the paths of safety through his own house. He would pull her from the hiding place out into the moonlight to do the thing he intended.

The old man had known. One day, a month ago, he had said, "Go out to the woodshed,

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Little One. Stay there till I call."

Without understanding, she had taken the doll and gone to wait patiently in the dark shed. The old man had never laughed about the doll. He knew it was her comfort for disappointment and things that couldn't be explained, and solace for a loneliness that had nothing to do with the cabin, or the forest. When she was afraid she held its body close, peering lovingly into the cracked china face, finding something there that quieted her.

From the shed window she had seen the man cross the yard. He had been to visit many times and her grandfather had never sent her away before. Then she remembered, and lifted her hands to touch the soft little breasts that hadn't been there last summer. She remembered the man watching her as she walked about the yard and through the cabin. He came from the shack up on the mountain trail, and he looked at her with eyes like little yellow candles flickering in his brown face. It was a hunter's look, narrow and hungry, the way a man eyes a doe along his gunsight. When the old man saw it he stopped asking him to sit and talk and have a cup of cider.

She huddled deeper into the shadows, her ears animal-sharp for the first sound of his approach. Small, familiar noises pricked the black silence, but tonight the forest gave her no sanctuary. Whimpering now, she scrabbled among the dry leaves in the bottom of the culvert, searching for the doll. It had been under her arm when she fled the cabin, but it was gone now, and without it she felt like a child without a mother. The leaves crackled and rustled as she hunted, not caring if he could hear her.

She knew he was there. From a crouch she looked up, widening her eyes into the blackness, and saw the blacker bulk of him above her. In the narrow place between the rock walls he stood, letting his breath out in a bubble of laughter. A thin band of light sparkled upward as he raised his arm and peered down at her. She stretched her hand toward him, palm outward, and drew back against the rock.

"I see you, girl, in there," he said softly. "I'm comin' in to get you now."

"No," she said. "No—you mustn't come in here. This is my place." She began to pull

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the leaves around her, piling handfulls across her knees, up to her waist. "No—"

He laughed again, and when he raised the light she saw the gun.

Then she was battering his legs, toppling his heavy body as she ran, close to the ground. His curse brushed her neck as she flung herself away from his hands and ran. The black trees opened before her, the rough path moon-bright under her feet as she sped through the forest toward the cabin.

He followed, hunting her silently now, as he would hunt an animal, weaving the light through the trees. She was swift, but the thump of his heavy feet was close, the sound of his breathing intimate in her ears. She darted through the patches of moonlight, sobbing without words for sight of the cabin, for the old man and safety.

Then her foot struck something and she went down, crashing through brush and dead branches to the ground. Her hands, cut and bleeding, clawed at the leaves and then she felt the doll, at the edge of the path where she had tripped over it. She scrambled to her feet, turning, and threw the doll upward, straight at his face.

The china head shattered into his eyes and the light fell in a bright arc as it hit the ground.

He flung the gun away and dropped, screaming, to his knees. Pain knifed into his skull as he writhed among the leaves, clutching his bloody face, spot-lit like a dancer by the light he had dropped. He raised his head, smearing the blood and tears away to clear his vision, and then horror broke in him, cancelling pain. All feeling left him as he stared ahead.

She stood behind the light, against the black trees, her narrow brown flanks glistening with sweat, her delicate nostrils flared in rage. His scream was terror and disbelief as he watched her gather quivering muscles for the leap. The small, sharp hooves poised for a tick of time above his face, and in that instant he saw the fear madness in her eyes. In the moment before she struck, he understood what he had become.

THE END

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WHAT CROUCHES IN THE DEEP

By ARTHUR PORGES

At the bottom of the sea was a treasure and a thing, a filthy thing that once had been a man. Could Driscoll bring one back without the other?

FIFTEEN hundred fathoms down, the water was liquid darkness, the ocean floor chill, gray ooze. On broad caterpillar treads, Steve Driscoll's submersible ploughed steadily forward in a cloud of silt, up out of the depths, its powerful twin engines rumbling.

The man rechecked the control panel, a pleased smile on his angular, good-humored face. Right on course. Somewhere—straight ahead, with luck—on the farther edge of this great undersea valley he was leaving, the submarine U-458 lay in sixty fathoms with its cargo of dead—and seventy million dollars in gold and gems.

Fifty-three years earlier, just before V-E Day, the submarine, transporting a dozen top Nazis and a choice selection of Europe's most portable loot, had left Germany bound for sanctuary in South America. But halfway in their desperate flight, the U-458 had been spotted by a lumbering patrol plane, a clumsy workhorse of the air. Even as the hostilities ground to a bloody halt in Berlin, the plane's bombs sent the submarine plunging to the bottom.

There was only one survivor, a seaman left on deck when the U-458 crash-dived in vain. He told his interrogators of gold bars, sacks of currency, and priceless artwork. Eyes shining, he spoke of a big wooden case which had split during the loading to spill a glittering cascade of

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diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

Recalling the seaman's testimony in old, crumbling newspapers, and his own researches in the voluminous records of World War II, Steve smiled a little grimly.

The metal detector buzzed, an imperious tone, and his pulse leaped. He was now out of the deep, the meter reading only sixty-three fathoms, and something shadowy was visible just ahead. Steve gave a little grunt of satisfaction; for the object, starkly clear in the probing beam, was a submarine lying on the dark ooze, her sleek lines almost completely obliterated by a half century's fine marine growth. The ship was resting almost upright, too, with conning tower vertical, he noted. A helpful circumstance, although not vital to the operation of his versatile machine.

But it was necessary to make sure of her identity; after all, more than one U-boat had taken its last dive in these waters. Systematically, the submersible prowled its find. Finally Steve's spotlight centered on the painted symbols, rusty and weed-obscured, but still legible. This was definitely the U-458, with its seventy millions. Except for that narrow, ragged tear in her stern, the ship seemed little damaged. Evidently she had been ready to dive when bombed, for her deck was clear, and the hatches dogged shut.

Steve brought his submersible alongside, and studying a copy of the U-boat's plans, selected a point on the hull of the crew's quarters. He tugged at a lever, started an electric motor, and seized a control stick not unlike that of a light plane. A quarter-inch tubular drill tipped with boron carbide thrust from the submersible's bow to press against the U-458. As the motor hummed, Steve shoved the lever forward, and the hollow probe pierced the wreck's double hull like a mosquito's sting entering human skin. When the racing bit told him he was through, Steve cautiously twisted a valve handle, only to wrench it tight again as a needle of icy water under the heavy pressure of sixty fathoms jetted into the little craft.

"Crew's quarters flooded, all right," Steve murmured. "Let's try the control room."

Again the sampling drill stabbed the submarine's steel skin. This time, when he cracked open the valve, there was a rush of fetid gas: cold,

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devitalized, loathsome. Grimacing, he diverted some of it into the analyzer. There was only a trace of oxygen; almost seven per cent—a fatal concentration — was carbon dioxide; and the nitrogen which comprised the main volume was heavily contaminated with organic compounds. It was easy to tell that men had died in that compartment.

"Wonder where the loot is?" Steve speculated aloud. "If the survivor said anything about that, it sure isn't on record. My guess would be they loaded it in place of the torpedoes, since they didn't plan to do any shooting. On the other hand, without a full crew, almost any compart—" He stopped, his eyes widening incredulously. Ringing with crisp clarity through the adjoining wreck were three metallic clangs, as if someone were pounding on the hull.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed. Then he laughed, a little shakily. "Gave me quite a jolt there for a second. Some of the U-boat's gear must be hammering her side when there's a bit of current." He paused, reflecting. There hadn't been a thing dangling on the submarine that he could recall from his circuit of her; and at this depth the water was seldom in motion.

The sound came again: three staccato raps, strong and insistent. Little beads of moisture sprang out on his tanned forehead. "Don't tell me some joker's got to the gold first!" he gritted between set teeth. "I must be hearing things, for sure."

Moving with feverish haste, his face dark, he manipulated the controls of his sonophone. Four times its intense, ultra high frequency pulsations made frothy cavities in the inky water. Instantly came the urgent-sounding response: four taps from inside the sunken U-boat.

With fingers that shook, Driscoll signalled in international Morse: "Who are you?" He waited, tense and puzzled. It just didn't seem possible that any other diver could have forestalled him. Nobody else in the world had a ship like his. The Bell-Weinberg two-man submersible on which this one was modelled, failed miserably below fifty fathoms. And if a man went down in one of those self-contained, heavy-armor jobs, he certainly couldn't make it through that narrow slash in the stern. Skin divers? Fantastic. Not at this depth, in these frigid waters. No air hose in sight, either; and no

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conventional outfit would sustain a man for more than a few minutes at sixty fathoms. No, it was some crazy mistake. Something banging on the ship's hull. All the answer he'd get to his message would be those same meaningless raps.

Then he stiffened, his jaw dropping. Slowly, but in comprehensible Morse, came the words: "Trapped inside control room. Help."

Although his brain throbbed to unanswered—seemingly unanswerable — questions, Steve replied as any good seafarer must. Nothing has precedence over saving life, and few sailors bother about the risks. Steve would act in the tradition of centuries. He signalled with unhesitating assurance: "Coming into sub. Stand clear of starboard side."

This time the big drill used for entrance and salvage came into play. Eighteen inches in diameter, its whirling, diamond-studded rim gnawed into the rusty metal like a mouse into soft wood. As Steve was adjusting the inner airlock, he heard the double mouthful of corroded metal ejected by the drill, and the sucking sound of silicoid packing making the junction watertight. A twinkle of approval lit his blue eyes; everything was working by the book. A sweet ship! Even after all this time.

He pressed a button, and the low pressure pumps began to empty the tube which now joined the two submarine craft in an eighteen-inch, ten-foot long, hollow cylinder. When the pumps stopped, indicating a dry connection, Steve put on his mechanical lung, opened the inner hatch, entered, closing it behind him, and crawled down the wet tube. At the outer lock, he paused, oddly reluctant. By opening the steel port before him, he could scramble into the U-458. Yet somehow he hated to do it. Somewhere in his brain a tiny alarm bell rang an insistent warning. He had to fight an almost overwhelming impulse to return to the submersible, break the contact, and get out of there —fast. Then he set his jaw. Hell, he thought; it's that fey Irish mother coming out in me. He couldn't leave a fellow human trapped in the sub, not even in these peculiar circumstances. A guy couldn't sleep nights. Besides, what was there to be afraid of? With a shrug, Steve opened the hatch, and holding his powerful flashlight straight ahead,

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wriggled down into the control room of the U-458.

He swung the beam in a searching motion. What he saw made him gasp. There, directly in its glare, incredibly cadaverous, sunken eyes dilated, stood a tall man, wearing a faded, mildewed uniform of the Death's Head Hussars, elite corps of the notorious S.S. troops.

The white, granulated lips moved, and in a thin, hollow voice, dry and passionless as the rustle of dead leaves, the apparition said: "Colonel-General Werner Diekmann." The mouth twisted in a travesty of a smile. "Welcome to the U-458."

As the flashlight shook in his trembling hand, Steve thought for a moment that the submarine itself rocked, about to break free of the tenacious silt. Then he rallied, steadying the beam, as Diekmann spoke again.

"Can you get me out of here?"

Driscoll gaped at him, unable to phrase a reply. The whole situation numbed his normally quick mind. Where had he heard the name "Diekmann"? It was damnably familiar, and in no pleasant connotation. Then he remembered the survivor's list of distinguished passengers, given in the newspapers of 1945, Colonel-General Werner Diekmann—of course! He was high on the list. But that was impossible, fantastic. The man would be ninety, and except for his emaciation, this fellow was a vigorous fifty at most. Good God! Even now there was no oxygen in the compartment, only a stale effluvium that would gag a buzzard.

"Diekmann," he repeated thickly through his mask. Then, as another memory returned: "Warsaw."

The ruddy, hollow eyes, unblinking in the pitiless light, held a faint internal gleam. "You have heard of me," the general said in that uncanny, soughing voice.

"Yes," Steve whispered. Then, spreading the fingers of his right hand in a gesture of bewilderment: "But—but—my God, General, you—fifty years in a tomb like this—fifty years! And, damn it, you're not old enough!" Protest sharpened his voice. "I don't believe it; I won't believe it. It's insane." Diekmann watched him stonily, and Steve blurted: "How did you live—and breathe?"

"It's not so impossible as all that," the other replied. He seemed to hesitate, then said

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slowly: "I was torpid much of the time, like a hibernating animal. Then, too—but I cannot explain. There are many mysteries in the world. Besides, explanations can wait. Let us get out of here. Come, man, let us go."

He stepped to the airlock, his whole lean body alive with eager, preternatural energy. Steve turned, putting the light beam on him again, and in the glare Diekmann's deep-set eyes shone like those of a great carnivore.

Driscoll looked at him steadily, stifling his aversion. After all, whatever his crimes, fifty years in this hulk were punishment to satisfy the most vengeful. Yet there was the treasure, too. His life savings were tied up in the submersible, and there were plenty of creditors waiting on the surface. If he came up empty-handed, they'd take his ship. Sure, it was tough on Diekmann to delay, but it wouldn't be for long.

"The gold and jewels," he said stiffly. "If you don't mind, General, I'll help myself before we move out." He added, almost in apology: "This is my first chance to clean up a valuable wreck." Immediately he felt furiously angry with himself. Why apologize to this murderer about the treasure? It wasn't his. It belonged to a bunch of poor devils long since dead.

"Gold," Diekmann whispered. "Ah, of course. So that's why you're here. Yes, but you see, the torpedo room is flooded. Hopeless, is it not? Sixty fathoms, I believe. If we had only stored it here—"

"Don't you believe it," Steve protested. "You don't know what a sweet outfit I have. It's made to order for wrecks, flooded or not. I'll just climb back into my ship and tear that torpedo room wide open."

"I'll go with you," the general said.

"I was thinking you'd better wait until—"

"No!" The disembodied voice was peremptory. "I'll come along."

"It will be too crowded for working," Driscoll objected. "I know how you feel, but it won't take more than an hour, and if I go back without any gold, they'll steal my ship from me."

"I come!" The gaunt, grotesque figure stood squarely before the exit, great, wire-muscled hands working convulsively. "Do you take me for a lump—a fool? You're here for gold; you confess it. Who would be stupid enough

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to take a man instead of more treasure?"

"If you think I'd abandon anybody down here for a few more dollars," Steve flared, "you're batty!" Bitterly, he added: "Don't try to saddle me with your own filthy Nazi tactics."

The general eyed him, his dead-white face immobile. "Spare me the lecture," he said. "You're not getting out of here alone." His towering body seemed to ripple with nervous undulations like that of a giant centipede; but Steve noticed with horror that his chest did not rise or fall to any breathing. Stepping back, he studied the menacing figure before him with new understanding. It came to him that his hunch about the U-boat was correct. Yet how could he have dreamed of encountering anything like this? He knew now, with dreadful certainty, what Diekmann was.

Crouching a little, he gritted: "Nothing human could have lived here, in this steel coffin, fifty years. Even now, there's no air—and you are not breathing." A nervous hum appeared in his voice. "What kind of a monster are you?"

"Very well," Diekmann said coolly. "Why pretend? Of course, I'm obviously not human, as you understand the term. Nevertheless, I want to get back—to the surface."

"No!" Steve's jaw muscles knotted. "Damned if I will! To turn a thing like you loose again—"

"I warn you," the general broke in, his hoarse whisper charged with a kind of soulless ferocity, "if I stay here, it won't be alone."

For a heartbeat Steve hesitated, weighing Diekmann's threat. Then, without a word, he sprang, one big fist smashing hard against the other's lantern jaw. There was two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind the savage blow, but to his chagrin, this Sunday punch was absorbed without a blink. Then iron fingers gripped his wrist with a force that made him wince.

"That was foolish," the general told him. "If I were to pull off your mask—" Steve writhed desperately in the relentless clutch. "Don't worry," Diekmann reassured him ironically. "I need you to get me out of here. A gentlemen's agreement, yes?" He released Steve's wrists, and tight-lipped, the man massaged them. The general's strength, too, was more than human.

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"Okay," Steve submitted. He moved towards the air-lock, but Diekmann shook his head. "All right," Driscoll snapped. "You go first, then." Immediately Diekman began squirming through the port. The man followed, and when the general reached the inner lock, called directions for opening it. In a few minutes they stood together in the submersible, Steve seething with homicidal rage, his passenger evilly alert.

Pulling off his mask, Steve swung the inner hatch shut, and curtly showed Diekmann where to hunch himself on a gear-box well clear of the controls. Even so, it was crowded.

"Now, if you don't mind," Steve said, his voice heavily sarcastic, "I'll grab some of the treasure before we start up."

"By all means," was the smooth reply. "I can use—" He broke off, but Steve easily completed the thought. He had no illusions about the present situation. It was a desperate one for him. Obviously, once they reached the surface, Diekmann would kill him, take a good fistful of loot —probably some of the fabulous gems—sink the submersible near land, dump the uniform, and pretend to be a shipwrecked sailor. All that kept him from doing the job now was his need of Driscoll's technical knowledge. No, Steve thought, there was only one out for him: he must destroy the general first.

But how could that be done? There wasn't even a gun on board, and he doubted if one would be of much use. It was very unlikely that a single shot could kill anything with Diekmann's superhuman vitality; and once those incredible paws found him, no second shot would be possible. No, killing this creature would not be easy; it would have to be a remarkably thorough job, like scotching a snake. Even now, the red, cavernous eyes, cold-lit, watched his every motion. The general had graduated from one of the toughest, most ruthless schools of modern times—and reached the top in a world of trained killers.

Suddenly Diekmann began to breathe in short, stertorous gasps. Steve's skin crawled. The general was already preparing himself to pass again as human, up there on the surface. Stern-faced, Driscoll put him out of his thoughts, and turned to the task in hand.

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There was a sucking thud as they tore free from the U-458. Steve heard the clanging shriek of tortured steel ripping as the rush of high pressure water through the eighteen inch hole collapsed the bulkhead between the crew's quarters and the engine room. No doubt every major compartment was now flooded.

Moving with a practiced efficiency acquired by many hours of rehearsal in shallow water, Steve prepared to crash the torpedo room. This time he drilled a series of small holes in a roughly rectangular pattern, and then used the hydraulic nippers. The high-power claws, resembling those of a huge lobster, tore away the plating like wet paper, laying the compartment wide open. He tooled the submersible's nose into the gap, and snapped on the searchlight. There in the penetrating glow, Steve saw a tumbled mass of boxes, bales, sacks, and canisters, all covered by roiled water. Most of the containers were rotted; he could see pulpy remnants of paper money swirling about; and one wooden box spilled a stream of gold coins.

Using a remote control grab-bucket, Steve went to work, dumping the desirable items into the open cargo channel, not unlike a king-size rain gutter, which made a capacious belt around the submersible. Once a rotten sack burst open, spilling a great pile of tooth-fillings, and Steve felt his stomach churn. Gold was gold, but this kind he didn't care to take; the aura of evil was still too strong after half a century. As far as he was concerned, that part of the treasure could stay on the sea bottom until that far off day when the sun would explode and the oceans boil away.

While he worked, ever conscious of the silent, watchful Diekmann just behind him, Driscoll's mind was frantically active. In a moment he'd have all the stuff he could carry; in fact, with the unwelcome passenger, he'd have just enough buoyancy to get topside. And he couldn't think of a thing, except to stall a bit longer. But the general was shifting impatiently now, and if he waited too long, Diekmann might figure out for himself the fairly simple routine for surfacing. And then . . .

Steve thought hungrily of Diekmann shot to bits by a heavy calibre rifle; of Diekmann smashed with an iron

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club; of Diekmann crushed by a hundred fathoms of icy water—then his mind snapped to attention as a thought came to him with electrifying intensity. Who wrote that book? A pioneer oceanographer. Beebe, of course. William Beebe.

Steve's anxious eyes swept the control panel. It might work, but not here. Meanwhile he'd better cook up a plausible story . . .

Without a word of explanation to Diekmann, he backed the submersible's bow out of the torpedo room, stowed the loading gear, and gave the craft full throttle. The twin engines roared as the sturdy ship moved back the way it had come—into the eighty-mile-long trench that slashed the ocean floor like a cosmic sabre cut.

For some moments the general seemed indifferent to the downward motion, but finally he said in his harsh, bodiless murmur: "Why are you not ascending?"

Glibly Steve recited his prepared explanation, counting fervently upon Diekmann's ignorance of submarine techniques.

"I have to go down first," he said. "My ship is designed to make the sea itself work for me. By dropping to a thousand fathoms or so, I let the water compress air, which is then used at shallower depths to pump my ballast tanks dry. It saves the motors from unnecessary strain."

The general said nothing, but shifted restlessly, his eyes wary. Stealing an occasional glance, Steve saw him settle back finally to a more relaxed position. Evidently he felt that there was no serious mischief within the man's power so long as they were jammed together in the small control room. With an inward sigh of profound relief. Steve drove the submersible deeper into the abyss.

Gradually, as they lurched along at a steady twenty-three knots, the fathometer needle swung clockwise. Steve watched it gravely; he had never taken the ship to its limiting depth, and was now determined to do so. Five hundred fathoms, eight hundred, one thousand—twelve hundred. At 1800 fathoms—over two miles down—the tough hull of the little craft creaked a warning. It was time to act.

A casual glance over one shoulder told Steve that Diekmann was still crouched, observant, but not excessively tense, in the same position. Even so, this was going to be

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mighty ticklish, requiring flawless judgment of direction as well as timing. Making fussy dabs at various controls, Steve unobtrusively lined up the sample drill, pivoting it on the stiff universal joint at the instrument panel. A final peek at the general, another tiny nudge at the drill's opening, and he was ready.

With an inward prayer, Steve put his hand on the valve. A swift, ninety degree rotation, and through the quarter-inch tube, open momentarily to the sea, there screamed a wire-thin rod of frigid water, stiffer than a steel bar, more penetrating than the sharpest dagger—water squeezed into a terrible slicing machine by 1,800 fathoms of incompressible liquid mass bearing down upon it with a weight that makes the very floor of the ocean creep.

A single lightning flick of his hand, and Steve slapped the hissing jet in an eight-inch horizontal sweep, right across Diekmann's neck.

There was an indescribable groan, and something heavy fell to the deck. Closing the valve, Steve whirled with an exultant cry just as the headless general, standing erect and bloodless, seized his throat in a crushing grasp. For a grim, eternal instant, the bony fingers sank deep, and Driscoll clawed frantically at Diekmann's wrists, his eyes bulging, his consciousness leaving him. Then the terrible grip relaxed briefly, and Steve tore free, panting.

Groping blindly, the decapitated monster stumbled over some gear, and fell. It lay in a squirming, tossing heap, lashing out with hooked fingers. Finally the more violent spasms subsided, although there were still minor shivers. But comparatively quiet as the thing was, Steve had an overmastering fear of touching it. He had a hunch that Diekmann's incredible vitality was not yet spent. Obviously he was dealing with something of the vampire or werewolf order, a being partially immune to nature's laws. It had been a close call just then; his throat was stiff and painful.

Warily, Steve opened the airlock, arching his body to avoid the twitching torso. When he took the head, very gingerly, by its matted hair, the eyes fluttered and the raddled lips moved soundlessly. Nauseated, Steve hurled the thing into the tube, where it bumped to a stop against the massive outer hatch. He could hear its teeth grating, and his neck hairs prickled.

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Nerving himself, he took hold of one ankle, but the general's body snapped to a sitting position, and Driscoll shrank back, white-lipped. He stood there dazed, staring about. There wasn't much time to lose; the thing seemed to be recovering its muscular coordination. He thought he had won the war with that jet; but apparently only a battle.

Suddenly his eyes lit up, as he remembered the equipment for jettisoning heavy objects. Skirting Diekmann's fumbling hands, Steve reached into a recess of the airlock, unreeling a steel cable fitted with a snap hook. The uniform? No; that rotten cloth would never hold. What then?

He thrust a tentative toe forward, nudging the general's ankle. Instantly the torso jerked to a sitting position, while the big hands made eager snatches. But the moment Diekmann's shoulders left the oily deck, Steve whipped a loop of cable about the lean waist, caught the flying hook, and in a single deft motion locked it to make a steel slip noose.

Without a moment's pause, Driscoll sprang to the control board, jabbing a button. Diekmann's hands were already fumbling with the fastening; in a matter of seconds he might solve its simple mechanism. But the motor was throbbing, and the cable, drawing tight, slid the steel noose up under the general's arms. Now he could no longer remove it without difficulty. Slowly the struggling body approached the gaping airlock and vanished into the tube.

Immediately Steve kicked the inner hatch shut, and dogged it tight. Then he took a deep breath, a look of unholy anticipation transfiguring his haggard features.

"Diekmann," he grated. "Here's where you get yours!"

And he opened the outer lock, with the headless body still thrashing wildly in the tube, to 1,800 fathoms of sea.

There was a sound as if a giant insect had been squashed beneath a titanic boot. Then—silence.

When he reached the surface, half an hour later, the sun was shining on placid blue water. Steve put his head against the control panel, shutting his eyes and letting the warm sunlight caress his back. Then he sat erect, studied his instruments, and set a course for land.

THE END

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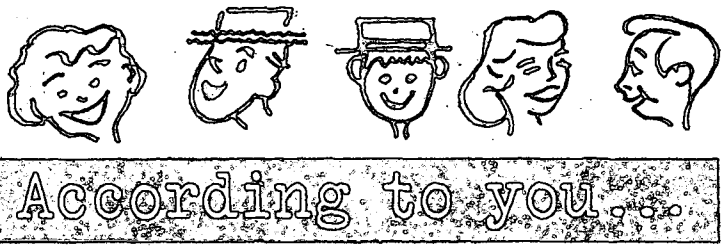

Dear Editor:

I've only been with *Fantastic* since August and I think that the stories in that issue were tops, particularly "The Girl Who Played Wolf." As for the September issue the stories in that were not good. A friend of mine and I are having an argument: he says the thing on the cover of your September issue is a werewolf and I say it's a cat man. Which one of us is right?

How about some good vampire, werewolf, ghoul and witch tales? I enjoy supernatural stories having to do with creatures of darkness and I'm sure that there are many readers who feel the same way about these tales.

Ben Solon
3915 N. Southport
Chicago 13, Ill.

⊖ *You're both wrong. That cover was an action photo of the offensive left guard on the All-Aldebaran zugsball squad.*

Dear Editor:

"The Screaming People" was a let down. It began in darkness! It never ended in light! It was the first really bad novel I've read in either *Fantastic* or *Amazing,* since they are on the upgrade. I hope that "Hunters Out Of Time" for February *Amazing* will make me expect as much as I did before.

James W. Ayers
609 First St.
Attalla, Ala.

⊖ *Did it?*

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Dear Editor:

Since you asked for opinions on the contents of future issues of *Fantastic,* I'm sending in mine for what it's worth. You have one fine magazine for s-f, *Amazing;* there are, in addition, at least another half dozen other magazines devoted to s-f. But there is nary one single magazine devoted to fantasy-weird-horror, etc. stories. Wouldn't it be rendering a real service to lovers of fantasy (I'm sure they must be legion) to publish one magazine exclusively devoted to Fantasy? The old *Weird Tales* lasted over 30 years. Anyway, I'm casting my vote, unreservedly for weird and fantasy stories in *Fantastic.*

M. J. Miller
1348 Lakeland Ave.
Lakewood 7, Ohio

Dear Editor:

I heartily endorse your idea of publishing real fantasy in *Fantastic.* I can't speak for anyone else but for myself it's been many years that I've looked forward to some editor who would have the courage to do that. *Weird Tales* and *Unknown* . . . those names still weave a spell of magic among fans.

It won't be easy to get the masters in the line-up again and it may take awhile for the fans to get accustomed to fantasy, but there are plenty of us old-timers who want it. Even if it is a struggle, it will be worth it. If anything will revive the low state that imaginative literature has fallen to this should be it. And you must admit, it needs it.

Clayton Hamlin

Dear Editor:

Let us have real fantastic fantasy—grown up horrible fantastic, fairy tales?

Best escapist lit. ever.

Hubert C. Rabbino
415 Central Ave.
Jersey City 7, N. J.

● *Folks, this is just what we're trying to find. And future issues will have it, too.*

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Dear Editor:

Gabe Keith is doing a wonderful job on covers color-wise. He blends colors to an unusual fantasy-like effect, but they don't illustrate much.

I like the "Coming Next Month" column in both *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. Keep it up.

The January issue of *Fantastic* had a wonderful cover. Who is Phil Berry?

Billy Eden
Box 62, Rt. 1
Lanham, Md.

● *Phil is a free-lance artist, and one of the best.*

Dear Editor:

The November issue of *Fantastic* was the best I've ever seen. "The Troons of Space" might be a little odd, but certainly a good adventure. "The Picture" was one of the best supernatural stories I've ever read. "The Savage Machine" was an excellent story, the best recent one by Garrett, I'd say.

Vic Ryan
2160 Sylvan Rd.
Springfield, Ill.

● *How do you like the Garrett story in this issue?*

Dear Editor:

I've been a fantasy s-f fan for 25 years and have a collection going back further than that. I am writing to you with reference to your editorial in the January *Fantastic*. I recall that you mentioned lovingly the old magazines *Unknown* and *Weird Tales*, just as if you are one of us fantasy fans too. You might have included those other grand mags. *Strange Tales*, *Strange Stories*, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, *Fantastic Novels*, and your own *Fantastic* in the first 12 issues or so.

You spoke also about there being "Giants in those days"—in regard to writers—and commenting on the lack of fine writers in the fantasy field today in any quantity.

Briefly, without recourse to my files which would bolster my argument, let's look at the record. Some of the "giants" of the

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old golden days of *WT* and *Unknown* are still with us. Why not get them to write for the new-old *Fantastic?*

You have Robert Bloch already. Others who are still alive and kicking around are: Seabury Quinn, August Derleth, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Dorothy Quick, Edmond Hamilton, C. A. Smith, E. E. Evans, Bradbury, Wellman, Frank Belknap Long—and a dozen or so more "giants" from *WT*'s great days. Why not round them up for *Fantastic?*

The same can be said for *Unknown*'s great writers: De-Camp, Lieber, Heinlein, Van Vogt, Gold, Eric Frank Russell (You had him in fact, get him in fantasy fiction), Williamson, Del Rey, and the others.

If you meant what you said about making *Fantastic* one of the great fantasy magazines to rank with the best ones of the past, start the boys writing for you.

Please eliminate the s-f. I get all s-f mags; you have a dandy companion s-f mag. Please, let us fantasy fans have one mag that is entirely fantasy and weird fiction.

Richard A. Frank
434 Sheridan St.
Williamsport, Pa.

○ *We wish we could simply call up these men and their agents and start ordering stories. But it isn't so simple. Many of these greats have switched from short magazine fiction to more profitable fields of books, movies and television. But we have Williamson and Lieber coming up. Some of the others will appear in time, we expect.*

Dear Editor:

Sure I'd like to see an all fantasy *Fantastic.* But there are several factors to be considered before such an all out plunge is made.

Magazines such as *Unknown, Weird Tales,* and let's not forget *Beyond* folded because there just weren't enough readers to keep them going. Would the same thing happen to *Fantastic?* I certainly hope not.

One bright factor to look at: in England a new fantasy and weird magazine called *Phantom* is doing rather well. If our tastes run as close to our Anglo neighbors as I think they do, a fantasy mag should do very well here. Perhaps, then, our

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tastes have changed and it is indeed time for a fantasy magazine to make its appearance.

Top-grade fantasy could be written and printed by the bale but if newsstand distribution remains as poor as it has been the last year or so, very few people get a chance to enjoy it.

I'm glad to see the fact articles go.

Tell Finlay to keep up the good work.

P. F. Skeberdis
401 Hallisy, Ferris Institute
Big Rapids, Michigan

• *We are concerned over the fact that many readers can't find* Fantastic *on their newsstands because of distribution problems. Perhaps a subscription is the only certain way to guarantee getting your copy regularly.*

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed the story "Jungle In Manhattan" in the December *Fantastic*. I also enjoyed the January issue. In my opinion "Passage to Gomorrah," "Fish Talk," and "Nothing But Terror," were very good stories.

For me *Fantastic* is the best science fiction book on the market.

Edward Greenlee
90 Wilson Blvd.
Westover AFB, Mass.

• *In the future, Ed, you can rely on* Fantastic *for the finest in fantasy too.*

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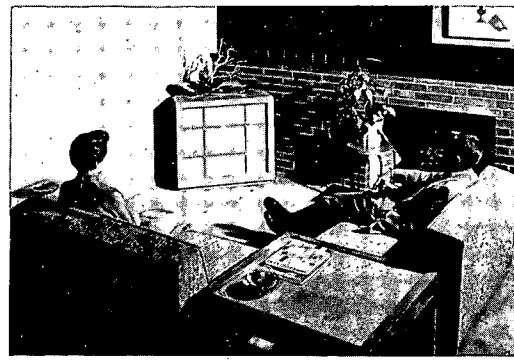

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